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THE MINISTER'S SON



# THE MINISTER'S SON

OR

## HOME WITH HONOURS

BY

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AUTHOR OF

'MISSING PROOFS,' 'GRAHAMS OF INVERMOY ETC.

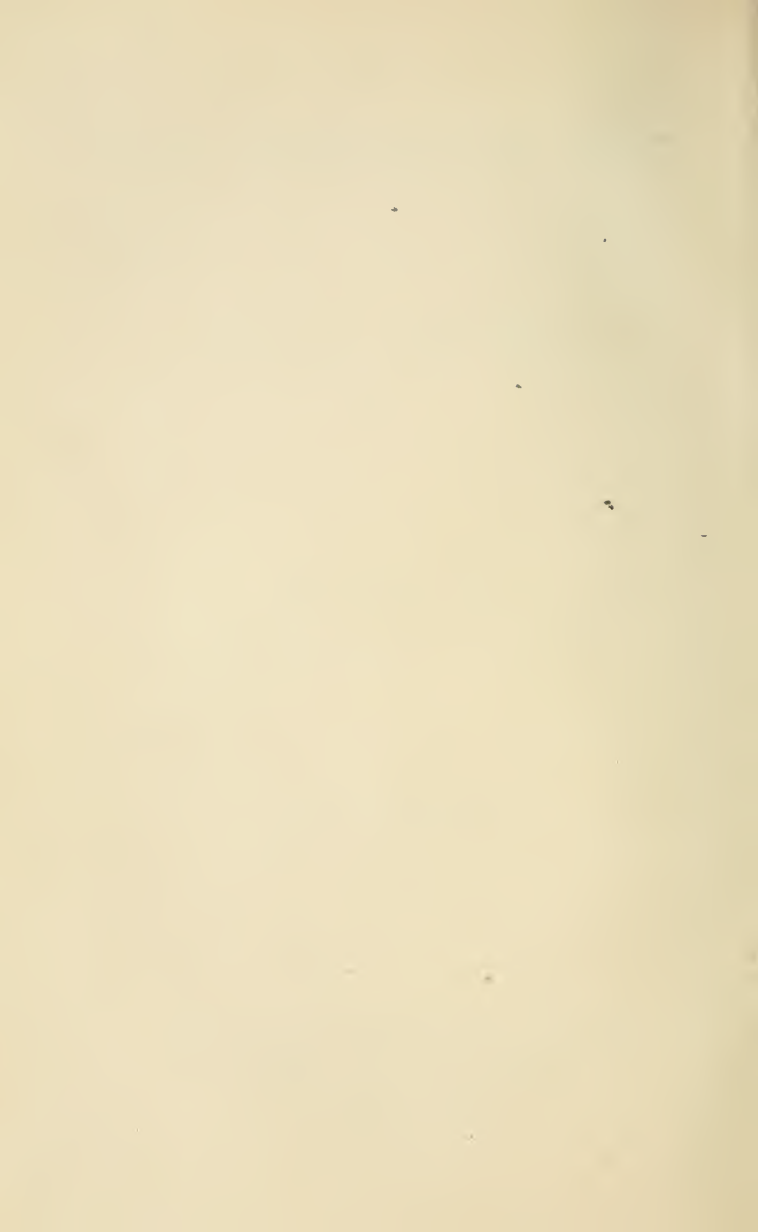
IN THREE VOLUMES

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# THE MINISTER'S SON.



## CHAPTER XV.

### OFF TO THE WAR.

RONALD had been some time in India when a season of unusual heat fostered the dreaded cholera, that lurks so often, like a stealthy snake, about the dusty cantonments. With the epidemic came the usual incidents,—the helpless terror of a panic-stricken few, the hasty flight, the terrifying rumours; and, on the other hand, quiet and disciplined courage, heroism of women, daily funerals, and rapidly-increasing graves.

More than one of the sergeants of the 2d succumbed, and, though Ronald's promotion was a mere matter of time, it was no doubt considerably hastened by the occurrence of these unexpected death-vacancies. It was imperatively necessary that they should be filled by men of education and intelligence, and no one was surprised that Ronald was among the first selected.

Even the trying scenes around him could hardly damp his satisfaction, and the letter he wrote to his mother by the following mail was full of almost boyish glee.

"If there were only a row somewhere, I should be quite contented," he wrote, forgetting that to his father such a wish appeared to be little short of a crime; while, if his mother could better sympathise with his ardour, she shrank from the visible expression of the terror that often haunted her dreams. It was not long before she saw that terror taking shape, and dreaded

to open the daily paper lest the large type headings should change from "Probability of War" to "Declaration of War."

There was terror, too, at Inverallan Hall, as well as at the manse. Muriel and her husband had come home, and it had been virtually decided that they should not return to the East. Muriel was paler and thinner than of old, and Leslie admitted that she had borne her share of what may be so literally called the burden and heat of the day. His father's health had failed of late, and it might be that he would be compelled to accept the help from his son that he had hitherto so jealously declined; and this probability combined with other reasons in deciding Leslie to leave the service.

Very joyous had the home-coming been, and Sir Duncan, as he clasped his daughter in his arms, thanked heaven that she and her husband might henceforth lead a quiet life, within reach of their kith and kin.

Unhappily, Leslie was dilatory in sending in his papers : amid the bustle and excitement of his return, all business was laid aside, and, as there seemed to be no especial cause for haste, the requisite communications were deferred. It was therefore with a very grave face that he observed the sudden indications of coming war, and he and Sir Duncan had been long closeted together in the library before he called his wife and told her tenderly but decidedly that he would not now think himself justified in leaving the army

“Why not, Frank ? The 66th is not near the frontier, and there’s no war yet. Oh, papa, he is foolish ; don’t you think so ?” said Muriel anxiously.

“I think he strains his idea of honour too far, my darling. I have told him so. If there were even any certainty of war with Affghanistan, it would be different ; but all this may blow over, and lead to nothing.”

“And if it does, there will be no harm done,” said Leslie; “in that case, I can go as easily as ever. But if it does not blow over, I shall have been right to wait on.”

“But the chance is so vague. If you sent in your papers at once——” began Muriel tremblingly.

Her husband put his hands on her shoulders, and looked with a pitying smile into her eyes.

“You are playing false to your own heart, dear, and you know it. If there were really no chance of war, and no possibility of my regiment going, you would not look so white and scared. You know there is a chance, and, if so, I am sure my little wife would face anything rather than the loss of my honour.”

For a moment Muriel flinched and wavered—her eyes fell; but Leslie held her still, waiting for the reply that he knew would surely come. In a few moments she

raised her head and returned his glance, saying, with lips that quivered, "You are right, dear."

Leslie kissed her forehead and let her go, and, turning to Sir Duncan, she spoke out bravely.

"Frank is right, dear father, if it is needful he must go; but oh, let us pray for peace."

From this time it may be said that the lives of these two women, Muriel and Mrs Bennett,—as of how many others—were, indeed, one unspoken prayer. As the war-cloud gathered more and more darkly, each went about her daily duties as usual, each smiled and talked and hid the burden at her heart, and neither for one moment altogether forgot the danger that was drawing near.

It came at last. The papers reached Inverallan just as breakfast was on the table, and neither Sir Duncan nor Leslie

spoke till the servants had left the room, for they would not have Muriel watched when she heard the news.

“War is declared, Muriel,” said Leslie quietly; and, though his wife did not speak, Aunt Alicia, who had arrived the day before, broke into lamentations.

At the manse the post came earlier, and the minister often of late had opened the paper in the study. On this morning he came in to morning prayers with a graver countenance than usual, and when on his knees he begged for help for our country in the approaching war, Mrs Bennett knew that the moment she had dreaded had come.

It was true that neither the 2d nor the 66th were in the vicinity of the frontier; and it might well be that the affair would be speedily settled, and that neither of them should be involved. But, at the same time, those who could read the signs of the times said that this was not to be one of Eng-

land's little wars, and that a large force would have to move up before we should see the end of it.

Muriel came often to the manse during these days of suspense, and together with mamsie would read and balance the probabilities, though with very little gain of hope.

It was on mamsie's aged head that the blow fell first. "*The 2d Highlanders will proceed at once to the front.*"

When Muriel read this, she hurried away, leaving her breakfast almost untasted, and was soon kneeling by the arm-chair where mamsie sat, with her face bowed upon her hands and the slow tears of age falling between her fingers.

"Mamsie, dear mamsie, courage. Ronald may win the distinction he longs for now, —you must be brave, and take care of yourself for his sake."

Mamsie looked up, and stroked back

Muriel's hair with the caressing movement habitual to her,—“ Oh yes, my bairn, I must be patient, I know that ; but dearie, if you strain a harp-string too long it will break,—and heart-strings are much the same. Mine will last well enough, unless,” —there was no need to fill up the pause.

At Hubblepore, meanwhile, where the 2d was still quartered, all was excitement and bustle. The orders arrived by wire early in the morning, and in a couple of hours were known all over the station. The sudden sounding of the bugle for the orderlies at an unusual time, roused the attention of one or two officers, whose bungalows were near the barracks, and they, as well as the non-commissioned officers on duty, hurried to the orderly room, where they found the adjutant and the colonel in eager consultation. As rapidly as possible the orders were copied,

and the corporals were walking briskly away with their order-books, but long before they had reached the bungalows the officers had galloped off, carrying excitement with them to every door at which they stopped.

People had been complaining of late that the place was dull ; there had been a lack of entertainments, and something must be done to get up amusement, but that complaint was silenced in earnest, and by the afternoon the quiet station was in a whirl. Figures constantly moved through the hitherto still compounds and empty verandahs. Natives and servants hurried to and fro, carrying *chits* or notes, the constant messengers in India, between house and house ; officers were overhauling their kits ; ladies with tearful eyes were hastily making lists of their household goods for sale, or beseeching friends to take in a box or two ; half-naked coolies crouched in the

verandahs, waiting for their loads ; and the native agents, furniture dealers, and store-keepers, knowing that their day had come, and that they would reap a golden harvest, offered for property of every kind about a fifth of its value, and had their offers accepted, since, under these circumstances, cash must be had, and there was no incoming regiment to purchase, as usual, the property of the one departing.

In the barracks, too, there was sorrow and dread : the wives and children must remain behind through the long hot weather, and many a wife would be a widow before the regiment should return. For them there was but little packing to do ; but as they saw for the last time to shirt-buttons and darns, the tears dropped on the work, and the very bairns hung about, silenced in their play, as they tried to understand that father was off to the war.

Two short days, and the business was all

arranged, the mess property stored away in mighty piles of boxes, passages taken, or houses engaged in the hills for the officers' wives, and the hospitable civilians provided farewell dinners and breakfasts, and what comforts they could for those whose homes were so suddenly broken up.

For Ronald the preparations had been full of interest, and his excitement was not tempered by the regrets of those who left wife and children behind. He wrote home, bidding his mother keep up her courage, and did not spare a moment's kindly thought to the little daughter of the sergeant-major, till with a pale face she timidly presented to him a little needle-book, filled with cottons and buttons and needles ready threaded. Then, indeed, as he looked into her tearful eyes, he put her gift into his pocket, and thanked her almost tenderly; and Ellen wept bitterly in her little room, when the last clang of the music

had died away, and the dust was settling down on the road where the whole station had assembled to cheer the departing Highlanders as they marched out in the early morning.

How empty the roads looked, and how deadly still the barracks were; how they missed, those poor women, the sound of the bugle, the reveillé, the lingering notes of tattoo; how sad were the faces of the few who ventured that night to creep out to the deserted mall. It was hard work for the officers' lonely wives to finish all their arrangements, and face, unaided, the chicanery of the native dealers; it was harder still for those who had to start, perhaps with helpless children, for the long journey home, and who felt at every step that they were putting a greater distance between themselves and the loved ones whom they might never see again. In trouble, the greatest share often falls to the woman's lot, and these had leisure to

think, to anticipate, to regret; while with the regiment there was little time for thought or anticipation, save concerning the campaign.

The marching seemed slow enough work when all were longing to get to the front; but after a few days the 2d was embarked in special troop-trains, and had the satisfaction of moving more rapidly. In such a journey men soon show their capacity for ready adaptation to circumstances, and Ronald stood the test well. Always alert and ready, he forgot nothing and mistook nothing, and—thanks to his good humour—had less to endure than those of his comrades who were more easily ruffled.

Of the early incidents of the first campaign, of the curious mixture of grave and gay, the dance at the last frontier station where a few ladies were to be found, the Christy Minstrel choruses round the camp-

fire, by which passed, some few hours later, ghastly convoys of sick and wounded, of the conflicting rumours, the contradictory orders—there is not space to speak, nor of the long summer months during which the treaty of Gundamuk was a-making, and the soldiers had nothing to do but to escort the busy engineers who were mapping out the country, and amuse themselves as best they could in their camp at Ali Kheyl.

“Dull work this,” said a sergeant to Ronald, as they lounged about, waiting for the usual game of “rounders” to begin.

“Awful,” replied the latter; “we might as well have stayed at Hubblepore if we’re to do nothing but look at rocks and sand, and only a limited portion of them. If one could get outside the camp a bit, it would be a change.”

“Not much good in getting potted by

one of these skulking niggers from behind a rock. They fired on the escort to-day."

"Did they? Any one hit?"

"Oh no. Are you coming to the band?"

"I suppose so," yawned Ronald; "there's nothing else to do. I wish there were."

In this way the time passed on; and though once or twice the attacks on the escort were more serious, and help had to be sent out from the camp, these trifling affairs were too brief to excite much interest.

At last there came a break,—peace was signed: a British envoy was to go to the fiery, treacherous, infidel-hating city of Cabul, and with display and honour was to be handed over at a spot agreed on to the Affghan envoy. Ronald was among the men ordered to escort the British Resident; and when the little detachment moved out to a spot nine miles distant from the main camp at Ali Kheyl, and

remained there for the night, even so slight a change of place was a source of pleasure.

Early next morning a party of riders came gaily in, and the lonely camping-ground was astir with preparations for breakfast and for a further march.

General Roberts was there, Sir Louis Cavagnari, the officers who were to accompany him, and his escort — seventy-five Sikhs of the splendid corps of Guides. Fine, soldier-like fellows they looked as they busied themselves about their horses, which were all in first-rate condition. Englishmen might well be proud of them as representatives of that Anglo-Indian army which has in this last campaign stood so stanchly by the side of its British comrades.

Breakfast over, the whole force moved off again to Karatiga, a small fort about nine miles further, built of sun-dried brick — such as afterwards, in similar strong-

holds about Cabul, successfully defied our nine-pounders. The progress of the detachment was not rapid, for the sole track was along what in winter became the bed of a mountain torrent. Great curiosity was expressed by the men as to the probable appearance of the Affghan troops that were to receive them ; and after proceeding for a considerable distance through a narrow wooded gorge, they came full upon a plateau in front of the fort, and encamped for the second time.

Next morning the Affghan envoy, as had been arranged, received them in state—two squadrons of picked cavalry being drawn up before the fort, one on either side of the road.

“ Look — look ! ” cried Ronald, as he caught sight of them through the morning haze,—“ there are the bays and the greys ! ”

“ So they are. Capitally matched the horses are, too ! ”

“What impudence ! They’ve got on scarlet. By Jove, I believe they’re English coats !”

“And jackboots, as I live ! What are yon things on their heads, though ?”

“Helmets ? Ay, that they are—dark brown helmets ; and they’ve white belts and sabres !”

“Ye’d think they were makin’ fun o’ us—pittin’ on oor verra claes !” said an old Scotchman indignantly ; and in sooth the effect of the Cabul troops was very much that of a caricature of the English. They were well drawn up, and, at a little distance, might have passed for European soldiers, as they sat motionlessly on their clever little Turcoman horses—the bay troop on one side, the grey on the other ; while between them was a group of stern-looking *sirdars* or chieftains.

Unlike other Asiatics, the Affghans despise ornament, which they consider “only suit-

able for women and children," as Shere Ali himself remarked when he saw the Indian princes arrayed in silks and jewels. These gentlemen of Yakoob's court, therefore, looked grim and warlike, clad in robes of brown stuff, embroidered in a darker shade of the same colour, and fastened round the waist by broad leather belts: on their heads were the tall caps of curly black Astrachan, and every man of them carried a sabre, a pistol, or carbine, and in all probability an Affghan knife. Their horses were spirited and active little animals, and altogether it was easy for the Europeans to see that these were men of a type very unlike the effeminate rajahs of Hindoostan.

A strange scene it was, this meeting, with its show of goodwill, its amicable interchange of civility, its words of friendliness, and on each side the consciousness of the bright blades, the ready rifles, close at

hand. There must have been black thoughts concealed behind the imperturbable dark faces, and not an Affghan present but must have remembered that love of independence, pride of race, and religious faith alike impelled him to hate these self-confident infidels, whose very presence was a challenge to him to vindicate the traditions of his country, and drive them from its soil.

After a brief conversation the infantry halted, and Ronald watched with envying eyes while the mounted officers closed round Roberts, and with the two envoys followed the first Affghan squadron, which wheeled round and trotted off on the road to Cabul; next came a troop of the 12th Bengal Cavalry, fine-looking fellows, in dark-blue tunics, and turbans with broad crimson *camberbunds*, or sashes, rolled about their waists; the rear was brought up by the rest of the Affghan cavalry: and in this order they proceeded to the Affghan camp—Cavagnari

and his friends looking their last on the friendly British ranks, many a face in which grew grave enough as he rode away, though every one talked hopefully, as people do who refuse to heed their own misgivings.

When the general and officers returned, an account of their reception soon got abroad. They had been offered tea, in cups of delicate Russian china, with cakes and sweetmeats at the tents, and had then ridden to the top of the now famous Shutargurdan Pass, and had looked with interest towards the distant city of Cabul, thinking that, save the envoy and his companions, none of them would see the valley again. They then returned to the tents once more and partook of a farewell feast — dipping their fingers in primitive fashion into the bowls, in which Affghan hospitality had prepared fish, flesh, and fowl for their entertainment.

After this repast they bade a hearty fare-

well to the Embassy, their good wishes hardly concealing doubt and anxiety, and returned immediately to the British camp, where next day the old routine went on as before.

Officers went away on leave, and soldiers wished the same liberty was theirs. Would this weary life never come to an end? One day was an exact counterpart of another—the same duties, the same amusements, even the same weather, with nothing to break the monotony. On certain nights the band played, and masses of men collected to listen to well-known airs; and as they lounged about, or sat on the dusty ground, their jackets were hardly distinguishable from the colour of the soil.

There was none of the pomp and circumstance of war in this far-away camp, but the business-like reality; and the favourite scarlet coat which pleases the eye of British ladies, and boys aspiring to a soldier's career,

vanished at the dictates of common-sense, and was replaced by one of a sober whitey-brown, which was less easily perceived by the enemy's marksmen. No glittering scabbard, no shining clasp or buckle, that could reflect a ray of light and betray the wearer's presence, was allowed; the very lance-heads, that were wont to flash brightly above the dusty charge, were blackened, so as to attract less notice.

More than once has such a change been made; and if the ladies who admire a uniform in a ball-room, and ask the use of this and that sash, tag of cord, and twist of lace, could only see their partners in more workman-like clothes, they would surely perceive that what the tailor has lost the man has gained.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## INTO CABUL.

WHERE existence is so monotonous every trifle is remarked, and it was on the 5th of September that Ronald observed a slight stir about the political officer's quarters.

“What's up over there? do you know?” said he to another sergeant.

“No; but the political's men are on the move to-day. Some new palaver, I suppose.”

“H—m; he passed here himself half an hour ago, and looked as though it were more than palaver. I wonder if we are to have a row after all.”

“No such luck.”

"Halloa, Bennett! have you heard the news? There's one of the telegraph parties come in, — wire's cut, — Ghazis attacked them, and they say there's a runner got in, in a devil of a hurry. Something's up," said a third man joining them.

"There goes a message to the wires again. Can it be a row at Cabul?"

"I shouldn't wonder; it's as likely as not," said Ronald, uttering the doubt that had been in many minds; and what else, indeed, could have been expected as the outcome of years of growing mistrust and ill-will between two nations?

For twenty - four hours the men knew nothing precisely, — there was an air of uneasiness everywhere; knots of idlers gathered to ask for news, and dispersed to seek for it, — but at the end of that time the camp was alive, fiery with rage and impotent desire for revenge. Impotent as yet. Cavagnari and his companions and his men had

been massacred, and as yet not an English soldier had stirred ; but the delay could not be for long—they must march for Cabul soon, and exact retribution.

“How soon can Roberts be here from Simla ?” was the universal question ; for the general had gone on leave, imagining that the vaunted treaty had secured peace.

“He can’t do it under a week, suppose he travels night and day.”

“He’ll do it in less, if it can be done by anybody, you may be sure of that, and everything on the road will have to give way to him.”

“And suppose he does, where’s the transport ? how are we to get on without more camels ?” inquired Ronald ; “a dozen generals can’t help us, if the cattle are not forthcoming !”

“—— them ! It will be days before we can be at them.”

Such was the talk, and such the constant

cry, "Let us get on and avenge our dead!" and when on the sixth day after the terrible news came, the general galloped into camp, men hailed his arrival with fierce gladness. He had justified the faith of his friends, and had done the journey even more rapidly than they had ventured to hope.

At last the march began, and Ronald found himself with the baggage-guard, ordered to get to Karatiga Fort that night. Now Karatiga was eighteen miles away, the road was but the bed of a torrent, and the long train of animals was wellnigh unmanageable.

People sitting at home at ease wondered that the general's progress was so slow, and talked impatiently of what could and should be done, and how, if they had had their way, the army would soon be in Cabul. If one of these fireside critics had tried the experiment of loading bullocks, many of which had never borne anything heavier than the

light wooden yoke by which they were harnessed to a primitive plough; if he had next endeavoured to drive mules more or less flurried by the noise and crowding, and of the temper that has made them a proverb; if his charge included camels, some of them savage, and all of them slow; and last, but not least, if he had to deal with a crowd of drivers speaking dialects, many of them unknown to him—drivers who disliked their task and dreaded the march—drivers who hoped by practising every kind of obstruction to get away altogether—and drivers who could not or would not understand their orders,—he would have had a clearer idea of the difficulties which delayed the progress of the avenging army. Moreover, for the lives of these same drivers the Englishmen were responsible, and it was no easy task to provide for the safety of men who did not comprehend that disobedience to orders would certainly entail danger, and

probably death, and who, moreover, would run any risk, strong in that stupid indifference which results from the fatal word *kismet*—what must be, must.

Ronald, with the rear-guard, picking up stragglers, urging on restive cattle unaccustomed to burdens, reloading those that had lain or broken down, hurrying unwilling drivers, or driving beasts himself, found his duties considerably less monotonous than usual; but with all the help the impatient soldiers could give, evening saw them only nine miles on their way. A few native cooks had been left at a resting-place by the headquarters to give them hot coffee, but not a scrap of food was to be had; and so they toiled on into the night, till the sinking moon warned their officers to halt and gather together the long line of animals.

Not a bit of wood could be lighted to warm the tired and hungry soldiers, in case of drawing the fire of the enemy, certain to

be lurking among the rocks in the vicinity ; and the dark hours passed slowly away in anxious watchfulness, men pacing wearily up and down because of the intense cold that would not let them snatch a brief rest.

It was indeed an anxious night, for help there was none at hand, and so small a force might easily have been surrounded and overpowered had the robber tribes been quick enough, or been able to muster in sufficient numbers to attack and overwhelm them. Once a shot was heard. Some luckless native follower had wandered away from the safe neighbourhood of the rifles, and at early dawn his body was found, and laid by the huge fire of driftwood that was made as soon as concealment became impossible. It was hardly broad daylight when the tired cattle were once more loaded and the march recommenced.

“ We must save that poor wretch from the enemy,” said an officer, pointing to the

stiffened corpse. "Pile a cairn of stones over him ; the ground's too hard to dig."

"It'll tak' a lang time, sir," said a sergeant.

"I know that, but we can't leave him there to be mutilated."

"Ye might manage it quicker, sir,—just burn him."

"Burn him !" ejaculated the officer.

"Weel, sir, it's his releegion," said the sergeant, gravely; "it's what his ain freends wad dae." And this being undoubtedly true, the order was given, and the body hurled into the flames.

Forward again, without food, only to find, after hours of toil, that the troops had gone on, and that the baggage-guard must spend at Karatiga another anxious night, though the tents pitched inside the fort square afforded some shelter from the cold.

Next day the men had time to rest and look about them. Away in front of them

stretched the stony track by which they had marched, and they could now better perceive the dangers of the pass. Steep wooded hills, affording ample cover for the enemy, closed in on either hand, and through the defile would come that day Sir Frederick Roberts, on his way to the front. At an early hour a strong party of the 2d went out to meet him, and encountered no opposition; but by-and-by a sound of distant firing was heard—at first dropping shots, then more continuously. It seemed that the Affghans were boldly trying to cut off the British general, and the small party left in Karatiga grew anxious. A patrol of Sikhs went out next to search the road, but they did not return, and still the firing went on.

Matters were growing serious, and a larger number of both 2d and Sikhs were next detailed; and to his great delight, Ronald Bennett was put in charge of them.

His orders were clear and precise : he must find out what was going on ; be careful of his own position, so as not to be either surrounded or cut off ; but he must give every possible assistance if Roberts were being attacked.

Away went Ronald, observing the ground keenly, and anxious to fulfil his instructions to the best advantage. A little way down the pass he came on the dead bodies of more than half the Sikh patrol, and the survivors reported the crags covered with Affghan marksmen. Nevertheless, after a moment's reflection Ronald led the way rapidly up the hillside, and, with his men in skirmishing order, began slowly to drive back the foe, who were unprepared for his attack, and gave way gradually as he pushed them from rock to rock.

Down in the fort the officers with their glasses watched him, and feared that he would follow up his success too far, and get

into difficulties; but they underrated his coolness, for the moment he felt himself able to hold his ground securely, he halted his men, and remained watching, on one side, the perplexed and discomfited Affghans—on the other far below, the road by which Roberts would now safely pass.

Soon the distant dust rolling up, showed where the chief and his staff, with cavalry escort, were rapidly advancing; and as they rode by, Ronald quietly descended from his post, and marched back into Karatiga. It was not perhaps till then that he realised how fortune had favoured him. He had had the opportunity which she denies to so many brave soldiers, and had used it well.

Commendation was bestowed upon him freely for his exploit. His name was mentioned in orders; and when, days afterwards, he found the order quoted in an Indian paper, he cut out the paragraph and sent it

home to the manse with a feeling of ambitious pride.

“Let old Jamie see this,” he wrote to his mother; “he will wish me more such luck I have no doubt, though I can hardly hope that any fresh chances will come in my way, I have had my full amount of good fortune.”

But, as though to compensate for the failures of his boyhood, fortune had marked Ronald as a favourite, and it was not long before he was again brought into notice. The story of a soldier's life, as it is told for the public ear, is a story of brilliant episodes—

“A sudden making of splendid names,  
That out of the smoke and dust into the light shall leap,”

and win applause. Our eyes are dazzled by that light upon the laurel-wreaths, and we willingly forget the discomforts, toil, and pain that are in the background. We cannot

fully realise them,—they are terribly un-picturesque, and, like other painful things, should be kept out of sight, lest the thought of them silence the cheers that hail a triumph. Fortunately, the individual soldier is content, on the whole, that it should be so ; for *esprit de corps* makes him almost as proud of the honours won by his regiment or his comrade as though they were his own, and if he grumbles at his hardships, he does it quietly.

Ronald had his share of the fatigue, the cold, the lack of food, the daily wear and tear which was borne cheerily and as a matter of course by officers and men, during the wearisome campaign in Affghanistan. It was hard schooling, but his character benefited more by it than by the college lectures to which he formerly listened with half-hearted submission, and he was rapidly justifying Sir Duncan's opinion that he was a born soldier. He was already known as

a reliable and cool-headed fellow, who could be trusted to lead as well as to obey ; and it may have been partly on this account that he was enabled to repeat at a later date, and this time under the eye of the general himself, the tactics that he had found so successful at Karatiga.

A battle was raging in the last defile that guarded the entrance of the fair valley in which stands the city of Cabul. On the steep rocks to the rear of the British the pickets of the 2d kept the enemy in check, lest they should work round to the camp. Again, as at Karatiga, their marksmen—skilled mountaineers—crowned the crags ; and again it fell to Ronald to lead the skirmishers against them and drive them back, this time into the teeth of fire,—fire of guns, fire of rifles,—and so into headlong flight.

The picket held the captured crags that night, and bitter and piercing was the cold ;

but Ronald hardly heeded it as he lay rolled in his greatcoat by the fire, or paced up and down the stony ground, for he knew that he was again marked out for notice, if not for reward, and it was with a light heart that he marched into the famous city, now at the mercy of the avenging army. It was not his personal good fortune alone that moved him as he gazed eagerly at the dingy walls, and narrow streets, where only a few old women and grain-dealers gazed curiously out as he passed. Like every man of Roberts's force, he remembered that on two occasions the British uniform had been seen there on the bodies of defeated and dishonoured victims; but now, as the troops moved steadily on and the inspiring music rang out, he felt exultantly that England was at last wiping a double stain from her shield.

Everything went on smoothly for a while. The bazaars were full of tempting goods; the fruit-sellers piled their grapes

and peaches, their apples and water-melons at every corner, and found the luscious heaps rapidly disappear; dealers in sheep-skin coats drove a better trade than they had known before; and the gathering in of winter stores went on briskly. Men implicated in the attack on the Embassy were arraigned before a tribunal,—culprits were let off or hanged, as the case might be; and yet the natives showed no sign of rebellion, and made no attempt to disturb the sittings of these judges, who were inaccessible to bribery, and seemed to be swayed by none of the motives comprehended by the Affghan mind,—since Affghan revenge for blood would have been exacted with total indifference to the innocence or guilt of individuals.

Perhaps the English were deceived by the apparent calm, not knowing, or forgetting, that the seeming still waters of Asiatic life can seethe into fury in a few hours; and there were many preparations to be made

for the coming winter, which fully occupied both time and attention. Treasure was there, too, that might be transferred to English hands. It was hidden away in the zenana, which perhaps the Affghans knew to be the safest spot when their foes were British ; but the spies, who in Asia will sell their souls for gold, brought news of its whereabouts to the camp.

Ronald was with the small party told off to remove it, and into the heart of the city they marched, and to the gate of the building where the Ameer's wives were kept. Great was the consternation, and loud the cries, as the infidel "redcoats" invaded the spot where no strange foot of man had ever been allowed to penetrate. But when it became evident that the visit was of a most business-like nature, feminine curiosity overcame feminine fears, and many a veiled face appeared at the windows ; nor were the close white veils, with their tiny eye-holes

of thick network, invariably in their proper places.

There was no time, however, for scrutiny of the beauties of the harem, for the treasure had to be secured ; and for many hours did the searchers turn over boxes, square leather-cases, called *yakdahns*, — emptying out a chaotic mass, from which a selection had to be made for removal. Asiatic taste can produce wares that Westerns covet, but it is innocent of the mysteries of shopping in the West ; and the prince, whose gold tissues and embroidered muslins are our envy, will fling away his money on trash that an English child would pass by.

Out of those packed cases came slippers, stuffs, scent-bottles, fine swords, glass chandeliers, Russian sables, portraits of the Russian embassy, Astrachan caps, cheap china, toilet-soap—an article of small value to an Affghan—vulgar photographs, a telescope given by the Queen to Shere Ali, Russian

roubles in quantities, stray Belgian and Austrian coins, bags upon bags of native coin side by side with old socks, and soiled clothes, and jewellery, good and bad.

“By Jove, look at this!” exclaimed Ronald, as he pulled out a small hard object, wrapped in narrow strips of Affghan felt, which are worn bandagewise round the leg from ankle to knee.

“That’s a prize. What splendid stones!” exclaimed an officer, taking it from him.

“Do you know what it is, sir?”

“The Order of the Medjidieh, I believe, but set in rare diamonds. This is a fine haul, Bennett; there ought to be prize-money for us after the campaign.”

“I hope so, sir; there’s plenty here, certainly.”

Plenty indeed there was. Ninety thousand pounds did the soldiers remove that day, marching the laden mules back along the narrow streets, where many an eye

looked askance, and many a hand moved involuntarily to the long knife, though no one dared to show a blade or utter an angry word, because of the busy camp close at hand.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## PROMOTION.

THE anticipated prize-money was the general theme of talk in the camp for some days, and an auction of furs and weapons from the zenana went on merrily, the proceeds being added to the prize fund. But the pleasant vision soon vanished, and not a farthing of the treasure did the army receive, except in the shape of pay—the Russian roubles being used for that purpose.

Ronald took his disappointment coolly enough, and did his best to check the grumbling which was audible among the many, to whom even a trifling share of the spoil would have been of great service.

“Soldiers were better treated in the old days,” said they, “for the Kirwee treasure was given as prize-money;” and they shook their heads sadly as they smoked their pipes, and declared that the service was no longer what it used to be. Personally, Ronald cared but little about the matter. As long as he was a mere sergeant his pay sufficed him: he did not mean to marry, and he did not care to save.

It might well be that he would think differently by-and-by, if it were indeed possible that anything should come of one or two hints that reached his ear. Men had risen from the ranks before now who had done no more than he, and there was something marked in the way in which he was congratulated on the fitness for command which he had twice shown. A flush of mingled pride and pleasure came into his bronzed cheek when an officer, not of his own regiment, asked him one day what

he thought of the position of men in the ranks who were given a commission.

“I think it must depend entirely on their previous position, sir. An uneducated man cannot be very comfortable in such a different sphere.”

“Probably not; that is my own idea. But you think a man of fair education might get on well enough?”

“I don’t know, sir. There are so many things in which he would feel the difference—little points of etiquette and manners—nice distinctions that I should think he would find it somewhat painful to have to learn.”

The officer was puzzled. Did this man not want a commission, or was he by chance a gentleman by birth himself? There had been some talk about him, he fancied.

“You speak as if you yourself would have nothing to learn—as if you had

known something of the life of a gentleman," he said, inquiringly.

Ronald drew back a little. "Perhaps I have, sir."

"Where do you come from?"

"My father is the minister of Tillybodle, in Stirlingshire. Do you know the county at all?"

"To be sure I do. I have been at a beautiful place there—Inverallan House."

"So have I, sir," said Ronald, quietly.

"Have you? Well, I think I may assume that you would not dislike to return there—with a commission?"

"I should not be afraid of taking one, sir," replied Ronald with a smile, as he saluted the officer; and as he went about his duty that day, he tried to realise in detail the change that he now felt pretty certain was impending.

Father and mother must surely cease to blame him for his choice if he returned to

them with so marked an honour. Sir Duncan would greet him with more than his old friendliness, and he would meet Captain Leslie on equal terms at last. Mrs Leslie, too: how would it be with him if he were again to find himself at the same table with her—perhaps, who knows, were to lead her in to dinner? Could he bear the light touch of her hand on his arm quietly now, or would he be in danger of losing his head again, as he had done long ago? He thought not: he was made of stronger stuff now, and she was for ever out of his reach. It would be but a cowardly part to go through life with the knowledge that another man's wife could set his pulses beating.

“If she be not fair for me,  
What care I how fair she be?”

thought he, whistling the old tune softly to himself. Not that it expressed his feelings truly—he did and must care for Muriel;

but he might care as for a friend who has been set aside by circumstances from the tumult and toil of our lives, and is worshipped like a saint in a shrine, but not loved as a woman may be loved.

At last the formal intimation was made that he had been recommended for a commission, and would in all probability receive one shortly. As far as he could tell, not one of his comrades was jealous of him—a fact that added greatly to his satisfaction; but in truth he had borne himself well among them, and had given no one any grounds for grudging him his advancement.

“It’s a gude thing ye didna marry yon bonnie lassie at Hubblepore, I’m thinkin’,” said the old sergeant-major; “she wadna hae gane junketin’ aboot wi’ the offishers’ leddies.”

“No; I don’t think she would,” said Ronald, remembering the contrast between

the pretty, childish face, with its ripe lips and large quiet eyes, and a certain small-waisted, pale, and powdered Mrs MacMoney, whose frizzled hair, wasp-like waist, and roving glances were supposed to be the admiration of the Hubblepore garrison—whose card was filled for a ball days beforehand—whose pony was surrounded by cavaliers at the band—and whose reputation was perhaps just what she expected and wished it to be.

The gunner's little daughter was the better lady of the two, he thought; yet he was at that moment more than ever glad that he had not yielded to the charm of her pretty face, even though he had guessed the secret that fluttered her heart.

“Ye'll be aimin' higher for yersel' noo,” said another.

“What! on my pay as a lieutenant? No, no; I'm not a marrying man, and am less likely to take that leap now,” replied

Ronald ; and his companions applauded his wisdom, however little they might believe in his adhering to his resolve.

Meantime, while stores were being accumulated and games were going on, snowball fights among the rest, the appointed judges were still carrying out the doom of criminals, and order was outwardly restored in the city. Spies, too, did their work ; but in a land where truth is unknown, these contemptible tools are of even less than their ordinary use. Every one who has dealt with Easterns knows that they have means of communicating with each other so secret and so quick that the keenest European is baffled by them. We wonder at the clever tricks by which prisoners in a jail elude the watchful warders, but in India a signal, a warning, will fly as if by magic, across a whole district, without attracting the smallest notice or creating the least alarm among the Europeans. Far away be-

hind the Affghan hills, while all appeared so peaceful, men were secretly making ready. Ferocious Ghazis were hearing and uttering appeals to faithful Moslems to expel the infidel, and earn heaven on the bayonets, if need be. The English army was but a handful beside the Affghan clans if all were to gather ; now was the time to fall upon the camp and sweep the foreigners out of the land ! And faithful Moslems heard and answered, and gathered silently and rapidly, so full of confidence in themselves and their religion, that one tribe even brought their women to the heights to see the ruin of their foe. As they had served Cavagnari, so would they deal with all infidels—this was their cry ; and so they thronged in thousands to the valley, and action after action was fought within sight of the blackened pile that had once been the pride of the city, the old fortress of the Bala Hissar.

Villages, from which women and children had long since been removed, but which harboured treachery and defiance, were burnt one after another by our troops ; and as the gathered clansmen watched the red glare rising into the midnight sky, they muttered their vows, and yet again doomed the strangers to destruction. But the strangers were men of the old British mettle. In vain did the wild heavy-turbaned Ghazis arm themselves with the cherished swords whose temper and sharpness were proverbial—in vain did they expose themselves recklessly to fire ; though they even dashed themselves on to the very bayonets, they found themselves no nearer the attainment of their end, for the business of the camp still went on.

There are weak members in every corps, and medals sometimes glitter above hearts that are not cast in heroic mould ; but the falterers before Cabul were few and far

between, and the heroes were many, and deserve to be remembered for their quiet endurance and devotion as much as for their dash and courage.

A day or two before the cantonment of Sherpore was actually besieged, a hard fight was going on about one of the spurs of the range that lies to the north-west of Cabul. Again and again had the Affghans been repulsed, and again and again had the fanatic Ghazis, waving their green banners and ivory-handled knives, rushed forward over the piles of dead.

“Drive those fellows off the hill,” was the order; and led by two young officers, a party of the 2d dashed out. There was a sharp hand-to-hand fight, and one of the officers fell some yards in front of his men. A Ghazi rushed forward with lifted sword, but Ronald was in time to turn it aside, and cut him down. Stooping to pick up the wounded man, he was instantly sur-

rounded, and received a blow which brought him for a moment to his knee. He was up again and defending himself in less time than it takes to write the words, and his comrades coming up, he was able to carry out his intention, and though hurt and bleeding, he bore the young lieutenant off the ground.

For this feat he was again commended, and visions of the bronze cross that every soldier loves flitted before his eyes as he lay in the hospital.

“How did the fight go, Hume?” he asked, when a comrade was brought in later.

“Man, thae Affghans were jist in thoo-sands. We fired and fired till a’ the ammunition was spent, but deil a bit they cared! Then we kept pokin’ them aboot wi’ the bayonet, and *then* they wadna gang awa’, and then I got nickit in the heid, and I ken nae mair aboot it!”

“Ye suld hae been there half-an-hour sin

syne," said another arrival. "They'd had eneuch when I cam' awa'; they were jist rinnin' like skelpit bairns! It was a real fine sicht yon;" and he concluded with a chuckle, though his arm was gashed from shoulder to elbow.

Even heroes, however, cannot face unlimited numbers; and from the 14th to the 23d, the avenging army defended itself in Sherpore, and there seemed a possibility that it, too, would need to be avenged, since, if the ammunition ran short, no human power could save it. Men looked grim enough after days and nights of toil and cold and watchfulness, but they looked grimmer yet when the ominous order appeared to "be careful of the ammunition." And admirably careful they were, cheering the heart of their cheery general, as he rode from post to post on his well-known white Arab, by their confident coolness and determination.

The coolness was needed; for after all, interlocked gun-wheels, and entanglements of telegraph-wire pegged into the ground, are not first-rate defences—and on these did they rely in at least one corner of the line. The greater the danger, however, the greater the honour; and many a lad at least, for whom the romance of war was still almost a reality, hoped to win his spurs at such a post.

“It’s a peety ye didna hear the chief to-day when Colonel —— speired at him what he wad dae if the enemy broke in yonder by the wire entanglement,” said an old sergeant to Ronald, who was at his duty again, though still weak from loss of blood.

“Why, what did he say?”

“‘Turn ’em oot,’ says he. ‘Ay, of coorse,’ says the cornel; ‘but hoo wad ye propose it should be done?’ ‘*Turn ’em oot*, I tell ye; what else wad ye dae?’ says the chief,

and rode awa ; and 'deed I dinna ken what mair the cornel needed."

"He must have looked a bit of a fool," said Ronald.

"Ay did he ; Colonel Macgregor's no' the man to say a word mair's nor wanted," replied the sergeant, with a quiet laugh.

Very slowly did the nine days of the siege pass away. Men knew what it was

"To be soldier all the day, and sentinel half the night."

They learned to lie down and sleep the sleep of exhaustion the moment that duty was over, the strain off their shoulders, and an hour or two theirs for rest, such as it was ; they never had their clothes off ; they snatched their food when and where they could ; they grew hardened to the sound of bullets, and the daily reports of casualties ; but they suffered most of all from the fatigue of the long dark nights, when ear and eye sought to pierce the gloom, and an attack

might commence at any moment, and when the bitter cold made it seem at times scarcely possible to endure till the dawn, when the precious cups of hot coffee should arrive, carried by native servants. To quote again from the thrilling lines of the Laureate:—

“Praise to our Indian brothers, and let the dark face have  
his due !

Thanks to the kindly dark faces who fought with us,  
faithful and few.”

And not only fought with us, but served us. Many a thin and shivering Hindoo, enduring the discomforts of the siege with none of the inspiring motives that strengthened his master, deserved all honour for his patience, and the pluck with which he risked his life. Even the carrying of that early coffee was no child's task when it had to be given to men on the outworks.

But those weary nine days ended at last, —and who that saw it will ever forget the night, when a sudden tongue of flame leapt

into the darkness over the Asmai heights, flaring and flickering there — a signal to thousands that the decisive moment had at last come ?

Ronald, as he lay quietly in his place behind the walls, gripped his rifle harder, and thought eagerly that the next few hours would see the end of the siege ; that it could end in any way but one, he did not even contemplate. There were level flashes of light from the rifles, that showed a moving mass of men many hundred yards from the walls ; and presently there arose a sound that might have appalled the stoutest heart,—a murmur—a yell—a roar of voices, increasing, malignant, terrible, rushing on upon the British line. Then at last an order sounded, and back came the British answer ; no shout of hatred or defiance—the men were sternly silent—but a continuous thundering peal of deadly fire.

“They’re wavering—they’ll break in a

moment — there they go !” cried Ronald later on, as the spreading light showed more clearly the swaying masses of the foe ; and thus, their ranks torn and shattered by the withering fire, their first attack fell away from the walls.

Hours of struggle passed before the excited Ghazis were driven into final flight ; but great indeed was the sense of relief and repose that fell that night upon the tired soldiers of Roberts’s brave little army.

After a while, when news from the outer world began to reach them again, came a despatch announcing that Ronald had received the expected commission in his own regiment. He had dreamed idly of such a thing when it seemed an impossibility—a thing entirely out of his reach ; and now that it had become a reality, he felt as though he were again in a dream.

Though his new quarters were told off, and as far as was practicable the requisite

changes made in his uniform, he gazed at both with a feeling of bewilderment rather than elation, and wondered that he cared so little, forgetting that he was by no means in his usual strength and keen health, and that physical exhaustion accounted for the listlessness with which he at first accepted the news.

Elation came, however, when, with a friendliness that made up for the defects of the fare, his comrades feasted him and toasted him on his last night among them, and when, headed by the pipers, the men of his company carried him shoulder-high to his new quarters.

“Good night, *sir!*” resounded cheerily, as they set him down at the door of the dark mud-room which was the best abode an officer could hope to enjoy; and Ronald, as he returned their salute, and thanked them heartily for their good wishes, wondered if his companions in his new sphere

would prove as good fellows and as stanch comrades.

He had no reason to complain when he met them next day—they, too, were proud of him ; and if he sometimes encountered a supercilious look or tone, he soon found that these were the natural habit of the men who indulged in them, and were in no way reserved for him alone.

It was well for him that there was still a good deal of duty to be done, and that he was fully occupied ; he had less time for thought of self, or uneasy comparison of men's tones and manners. Every one was too busy to pay much attention to him, and he settled down more readily into his new life than would have been possible had he been gazetted in an Indian station, where he must have become the talk of the place.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## “KILLED IN THE DEFEAT.”

RONALD received more than one letter of congratulation from his old acquaintances, including one from the fair dame who had procured his admission into the Hubblepore Theatrical Club, in which she begged him, should he ever find an opportunity, to come and see her again. He was more touched by a little note from Ellen Smith, in which she conveyed to him her own and her father's good wishes, and “ventured” to tell him that she was just engaged to be married. It may have been fancy, but he thought she did not write as happily as a bride should do; and he answered her cordially, expressing the goodwill he felt.

The absence of ladies made it easier for him to take up again, as it were, the old threads of his life, and grow accustomed to the feeling that the years he had spent in the ranks were an episode apart from his previous and present existence. It was difficult at first to pass along the line where men that had jested with him yesterday, looked him gravely in the face and addressed him as "sir;" and almost as strange did it seem to him to mingle in the coming and going, the making of acquaintances, the hospitality and fellowship of his new companions.

He had grown more reserved and silent of late years, and contact with the light-hearted youngsters of the mess was a tonic of which he stood in need; but after a while he brightened again into something like his old self, and soon became a favourite with some of the officers, as he had been with many of the sergeants.

That some, on the other hand, should dislike him was equally natural; and Captain Badger, a man of a harsh and jealous nature, who had lately exchanged into the 2d, and about whose antecedents little was known, soon showed that he, at least, entertained no friendly feeling for him.

One night at the scratch mess, where each man brought his own rations and his own rough camp-plates, some guest mentioned the Leslies.

“I met her once long ago in town,” said Captain Badger, in the supercilious tone in which he usually spoke of women. “A conceited woman—very. But after all, what can you expect? she’s pretty, silly, and well-married, and that’s all you can look for in a woman!”

Ronald’s ear caught these words, and he broke off a conversation in which he was engaged, and listened, indignation beaming in his eyes.

"Did she come out to India, do you know?" asked the guest.

"Should think not—just the woman to enjoy the London season, while poor Leslie's grilling in the hot weather."

"Mrs Leslie was on her way to India with her husband when I came out, years ago," said Ronald, in distinct wrathful tones.

"What the deuce do you know of her?" inquired Badger, with a stare.

"Enough to be quite certain she is not such as you describe her to be."

"By-the-by, you went to see her at Malta, didn't you?" remarked the officer who came out with Ronald's draft.

"Yes, the Colonel very kindly gave me two hours' leave."

"Do you mean Mrs Leslie asked you to go and see her? A queer thing to do, considering you were in the ranks."

"My mother and Lady Forbes were

friends, and Mrs Leslie was kind enough to remember that she had known me. Captain Leslie took me on shore,” replied Ronald, quietly but firmly, and Captain Badger thought it best to change the subject.

The English mail arrived on the following day, and two letters were laid down for Ronald, who was not at hand. Captain Badger, standing near, saw engraved in blue letters on the flap of one of the envelopes, *Inverallan House, Stirlingshire*, and wondered if perchance Mrs Leslie were now at home. Was this “ranker,” with his airs, corresponding with her? Had he—Badger—had the good fortune to discover a scandal? or what other explanation could there be of this letter?

Badger was one of those people who invariably attribute an evil motive; and while they boast of their worldly wisdom, out of the blackness of their own souls judge, or misjudge, their neighbours. He took care

to be present when Ronald entered, and was the first to say, "Here are letters for you, Bennett."

Now one of the two, Ronald saw, was from his mother, and as he knew it must have been written on receiving news of his promotion, he did not care to read it in public, and put it in his pocket; the other, which was from Sir Duncan, he opened at once. It was a characteristic note of warm congratulation, and contained a message to the same effect from Muriel herself.

Ronald's pleasure shone in his face, and it was with instant recovery of reserve, and no small feeling of provocation, that, on looking up, he found Badger's light grey eyes watching him.

"I am in a position now to answer your doubt of last night: Mrs Leslie has been at home some few months, having spent over four years in India," said he, returning Badger's gaze.

“What! she corresponds with you, does she?” replied the other, with that sneer in his voice that is as full of meaning as it is difficult to rebut.

“No, sir; but her father has written to me,” replied Ronald.

“Oh indeed!”—the sneer was stronger, and yet it would have been impossible to accuse Captain Badger of doubting the speaker’s word.

Ronald fired up, however, less at the implied accusation against himself than at the slight intended for Muriel. Two other officers were standing by the Captain, and with a sudden movement Ronald held out the last page of his letter.

“He writes a clear hand for a man of near seventy, doesn’t he? You can see it is a good signature.”

“Very good indeed, for a man of that age—Duncan Forbes; it’s quite clear, Bennett,” said one of the others, good-naturedly;

and Ronald smiled, and pocketing his letter, went off.

“You’d better let that fellow alone, Badger; he’s not one to let a thing slide,” continued the other, coldly. “He must be right enough, or Sir Duncan wouldn’t sign himself, ‘your very sincere old friend.’”

Captain Badger gave a grunt, which might have been meant to express assent or contempt; but he did not mention Mrs Leslie again in Ronald’s hearing. The incident of the letter, however, intensified his dislike—for it was intolerable to feel that this ranker, whom no one knew anything about, was apparently on intimate, or at least friendly, terms in a house to which he, Badger, had vainly tried to gain access. The truth was, that on the night when he had once met Muriel at a ball, he had done his best to “make the running,” as he phrased it, knowing her to be an heiress. His efforts made a great

impression upon her, as her father perceived when she begged him never, on any account, to invite Captain Badger to the house; and even that officer's noted imperviousness to hints or slights was not proof against the calm dignity with which Miss Forbes rejected his overtures, nor had the incident ever faded from his memory.

In his letter Sir Duncan informed Ronald that Leslie had lately rejoined his regiment, and that Muriel was living at Inverallan during his absence. “Your mother and she try to comfort each other,” he wrote; “but I think the anxiety is telling on them both.”

Ronald, as he thought of Muriel's happy face as he had seen it at Malta, could well imagine the trial she was undergoing, and in his next letter home expressed a fervent hope that Leslie might come safe out of the war.

It was true that, in spite of her youth, Muriel suffered more than Mrs Bennett,

because of a perfectly unreasonable conviction that possessed her that she would never see her husband's face again. For weeks she bore her dread silently; but when the 66th was ordered to Southern Affghanistan it overmastered her, and flinging herself on the little old footstool at mamsie's feet, she gave utterance to the terror that oppressed her.

She could not have chosen a worse confidante; for mamsie, whose Highland superstitions had never been altogether eradicated, was a firm believer in presentiments, as well as in second-sight, and her heart sank as Muriel spoke.

"We mustn't think too much of a mere fancy, my bairn," she said, in a voice that belied her words.

"But you believe it—I know you do!" cried Muriel, lifting her head from her old friend's lap and looking earnestly into her face. "You know you have no such

fear about Ronald; and if you had, you would trust it—wouldn't you, mamsie?”

“I'm afraid I would, my dear—though it would be against my judgment. No, I've faith that I'll see my son again before I die; but oh, my dear, we can't tell! Sorrow may be my lot, and you may welcome your husband home yet. James would tell you it is sinful to put dependence on a feeling like yours.”

“Very likely he would; but could he take it away? It is just a thing to bear, for no words can alter it. O Frank—Frank!” murmured Muriel, and Mrs Bennett did not attempt to console her save by a mute caress.

“I must go and walk, mamsie,” she said at last, raising a flushed face,—“I cannot rest, I cannot bear poor aunt Alicia's talk about it all. If I walk about the hills, where I am alone, I feel stronger, and when I am weary enough I sleep better.”

“ Ay, my bairn, the everlasting hills are a great sanctuary : carry your sorrow there, and maybe you will find peace,” said mamsie ; and Muriel wandered away on to the golden bent, up by the bracken and the birch, and through the rocky glen, and did not know that to that very spot Ronald had carried his misery, years before, when she herself was at once the pain and joy of his life.

To the women at home the Affghan war was rendered peculiarly trying by the suddenness of its vicissitudes. Again and again did they hope that all peril was at an end, only to find that a fresh storm had arisen — black and dangerous as the thunder - cloud that sweeps rapidly over the summer heavens.

Muriel rose every morning with her courage braced to meet the telegrams in the daily papers ; and when they were read, and twenty - four hours must elapse

before further news could be received, she went about her occupations mechanically, making little effort to shake off the dull weight of her fears. Had she been a nurse, able to go out and help—had any action been possible to her—her native vigour would have asserted itself. But to wait—wait helplessly, a prey to that overmastering fear—was almost more than she could endure. And now the Sherpore siege was over, Ayooob Khan was in the field, and the 66th was at Kandahar, with the enemy steadily advancing.

Sir Duncan was grieved to the heart for his darling, and did what he could to comfort her, but talked little of the chances, knowing that during suspense silence is indeed golden.

Unfortunately, Miss Alicia thought otherwise, and with the querulousness of a weak nature she harped perpetually on the one theme, till Muriel used to leave the room

in agony. Years, though they had mellowed her heart, had not improved Miss Forbes's appearance. Her skin had grown yellow and faded, so that it was hard to say whether her gold or silver ornaments were more unbecoming. Her dress was tighter than of yore, and somewhat more brilliant in colour; and as she sat at her knitting, uttering her remarks on the progress of the campaign, and mingling in a hopeless confusion brigades and localities far apart from each other, even her brother's patience was sorely tried, and he would beg her to turn her thoughts to other topics.

"How can I, Duncan, when, for anything we know, poor Frank may be lying dead now, and we sitting here? and you know they always mutilate the bodies shockingly. It will be dreadful for poor dear Muriel," sighed aunt Alicia; and Sir Duncan echoed the sigh, and wisely forbore to argue with her.

Muriel's love had softened her aunt's harsher nature, and the success of her schemes for the girl had left her nothing to desire. She was leading a comfortable life, with her wishes granted almost as soon as they were formed, and she resented with childish impatience this new anxiety that had disturbed them just when everything was so pleasantly settled. Perhaps if there were a great sorrow to be faced she might show a braver spirit, but in the meantime she added tenfold to her niece's trial.

The sorrow came only too soon. Muriel, who had been for some days strangely pale and restless, saw it in her father's face the moment he opened the papers, and she came round behind him and read the panic-stricken telegram that told of the disaster at Maiwand and the almost total destruction of Leslie's regiment.

“There are no names, darling—he may

be safe," said Sir Duncan, putting his arm round her.

"No, papa—I *know* he is killed. I saw him three nights ago,—let me see—the 27th. It was that very night. Oh, let me go!—let no one come near me!" cried Muriel, and she fled away to hide her misery within her own room; nor would she unlock the door for many hours.

From London Sir Duncan obtained by wire the earliest possible information; but it added nothing to her pain when he told her that Leslie was indeed among the killed—her certainty had been complete from the first.

To her bedside came mamsie with tearful eyes, while friends crowded to offer sympathy and inquire for her. Old Jamie's white head was seen daily at the lodge-gates, and letters poured in upon her, which after a day or two she handed unopened to her father.

“Answer them—burn them! or no, send them to the Leslies. What good can they do me?”

Aunt Alicia went softly about the house in a frightened silence: only Mrs Bennett had power to rouse Muriel, and in a little she ceased to make the attempt.

“Leave her alone, Sir Duncan—let her lie still and sleep. The strain of the last few weeks has been terrible—let her get over it in her own way. She is no coward, and she’ll come among us again of herself in a while.”

Mrs Bennett’s advice was taken, and time justified it. Gradually the torpor which had numbed body and mind passed away; and Muriel, the ghost of what she once was, crept out of her room one morning in her heavy black robes, and without saying a word took her accustomed place at the head of the breakfast-table.

Her father kissed her in silence, and tried

to second her effort ; but aunt Alicia's tears dropped into her teacup, and her voice, when she addressed her niece, was barely audible. Her courage once stirred, however, Muriel did not allow herself to lapse into despondency, but set herself to gather up the threads of her life, and rearrange them so as to suit her present circumstances.

Inverallan was, of course, to be her home ; and by-and-by, when exertion seemed to be the only refuge from sorrow, she accepted her place there as its future mistress, and began to learn something of the management of the estate—going into figures and mastering details with patience—for, as she said pathetically, while she fingered a pile of documents, “There will be no one to help me now ; and if I have to live longer than you, papa, the place must be cared for as you would wish.”

Muriel was still very young— young enough to feel for the moment that impatience of sorrow that makes death seem not only preferable but possible ; and her father was too wise to blame her. He hoped that some day she might outlive her grief and find another helpmate ; but he only patted her shoulder, and reminded her gravely that he had lived on and tried to make his life useful, though he had suffered just such a loss as hers—whereupon she blushed deeply, and returned to the papers, feeling that she had said a childish thing.

It was not often, however, that any complaints escaped her. She bore her sorrow quietly as a rule, and hardly spoke of her husband ; her one wish seemed to be to fling herself into the daily life around her, and to bury the past, and no one knew the wild longing that made her heart ache—the desire to know how Leslie had died.

If she could only hear that he had been shot on the field, she would have been happier—such a death was quick, merciful, honourable. But if he had not fallen so, if he had endured the tortures of that terrible retreat—the thirst, the fatigue, the bitter shame—then indeed her cup would be full, for she would be for ever haunted by the thought of what his proud spirit must have suffered. Surely some one, some brother officer, would write to her by-and-by; but weeks might pass before she could hear, and moreover, there was little time for writing, or chance of despatching letters to England, during the first days of bewildered fear and indecision when the enemy's armies surged round Kandahar.

There was nothing for her but patience; once more she must wait till there should come that inevitable recovery and reassertion of power that has hitherto followed, slowly perhaps, but surely, upon every

English disaster. She had not long to wait; again did the avenging army deserve its name, as it gathered itself together and swooped down upon the triumphant foe.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## THE GREAT MARCH.

AGAIN did the soldiers of the 2d prove themselves capable of more than the courage that wins a fight. It was with full consciousness that their last, and in some respects severest, task was to be fulfilled, that they finally turned their backs on the city of Cabul. Their duty there had been amply accomplished save in one particular. Years ago, when a conquering force stormed the fortress of Multan in order to avenge the cowardly murder of two gallant Englishmen, the bodies of the victims received late but honourable burial at the hands of their victorious comrades.

No such complete vindication had been possible in Cabul. Neither search nor inquiry threw any light on the fate that befell the bodies of the officers of the Embassy, and it was a bitter disappointment to many that they could not be laid with the English dead that lie thickly in the cemetery. Many a rough nature, little used at any time to feel or show emotion, and now more or less hardened by the events of a campaign, was aware of an unwonted touch of feeling at the thought of those scattered graves on which, in all probability, no English eye would look again. Many a last glance was given towards the spot where some comrade reposed in his long sleep, and more than one soldier went to smooth for the last time the broken ground that covered the remains.

Ronald, among others, was out on the last evening of their stay, and saw one of the men gather a crimson flower and thrust it into an old pocket-book.

"Whose grave is it?" asked he.

"Jamie M'Donald's," replied the man, with a gruff shyness; "his mither lives next door to mine in Scone, and I thocht maybe she'd like a bit flower."

"It's a kind thought," said Ronald gently, and passed on, thinking sadly enough of the two mothers in the little Perthshire village—the one whose son was safe as yet trying no doubt to comfort the other, whose only relic of hers was "a bit flower" off a distant grave.

"Shall we ever see those walls again, do you think?" said Ronald to a brother officer, as they marched out in the grey of the morning.

"We may not; but there will be a cantonment here some day perhaps—who knows? As unlikely things have happened, and the villanous hole must be ours or Russia's. It wouldn't be a bad summer quarter."

Ronald laughed. The speaker was well known to be suffering from Russophobia of the most virulent kind, and his views were consequently somewhat biassed.

“It seems to me Affghanistan would be a regular white elephant for either ourselves or Russia. What on earth could we do with it?”

“My dear fellow, if we don’t hold it, the Russians will; and once here—why, they’d be intriguing in every bazaar in India, if they are not doing it already. I was in the Crimea, and I don’t care how soon I find myself opposite them again. They’re a ruffianly lot, every man-jack of them.”

“There’s Bruce off on his hobby again! Just let the Russians drop, and tell us how far do you say this next march is?” broke in a third officer.

“Sixteen miles, I believe—to Zahidabad. They say we are to average fifteen miles a-day.”

“How the deuce are the followers and baggage to manage that?”

Ronald laughed. “That’s more than I can tell; but the general says so, and it strikes me it will be done.”

Done it was, in a style at which it may be truly said that “all the world wondered.” For the first week the work was certainly severe, but not to such a degree as to tax the endurance of men already trained to hardship. Day by day the force moved steadily onward, the train of helpless sick and almost equally helpless camp-followers always watched and guarded with scrupulous care.

Such a march would have been a feat if performed in a friendly country where there would have been nothing to fear, but it was doubly remarkable when executed in the midst of a land where the friend of to-day may be the foe of to-morrow—where ambuscades are probable, and harassing

attacks certain, and where, at no hour of the day or night, can vigilance be for one moment relaxed or precautions abandoned.

The 15th saw the troops at Ghazi, where no vestige of English occupation remained, only the actual citizens being in possession. Here the men had hoped for a halt, and they had accordingly hailed with satisfaction the first sight of the solid ramparts of the citadel. But rumour had been busy before their arrival, coming no one knew exactly how, but spreading uneasiness, in which the fresh arrivals quickly shared.

Ayooob Khan was in Kandahar; the city had been looted, the garrison at Khelat-i-Ghilzai was in extremity, the English were everywhere beaten. If this or the half of it were true, the army had marched almost in vain, though even in that case, to relieve the little garrison beleaguered in Khelat-i-Ghilzai every nerve must be strained.

There could be no halt with such tales

afloat in the bazaar; on the contrary, men who had accomplished one hundred miles in seven marches must forthwith see if they could not get through a hundred and thirty-miles in eight. On then, and let us take the bull by the horns, and begin with twenty miles!

Very weary were the limbs and sore the feet when that day's work was over. The heat was daily increasing as lower levels were reached, and the choking dust was almost unendurable. The ground, too, was baked and cracked, so that it added greatly to the discomfort of the men; and to make matters worse, not a drop of water was to be had for miles, save what the patient water-carriers could bear away in skins from the last halting-place. That scanty supply was very quickly exhausted; impatient cries of "Bheestie, bheestie," were met with a shake of the head and an ominous rattle of the empty skin, and then the

men toiled on silently, with dry throats and parched lips, and eyes that searched eagerly, but in vain, for any sign of moisture along the barren and yellow banks, or among the boulders heated by the fierce noonday sun.

Not less did the baggage animals suffer as they paced slowly along with drooping heads, too worn now to be restive, more likely indeed to break down and fall upon the rough track. A few more days like this would exhaust both troops and cattle, and something must be done to mitigate their discomforts — something, anything, provided that it did not check their speed or leave our countrymen for one needless hour in danger.

“The *reveillé* will sound at 1 A.M. The cavalry will march at 2, and the main body will follow half an hour later.”

That was the way the problem was solved. The men could rest in the evening and earlier part of the night, and they must

march before the sun was up to torment them. So in the quiet of the night the bugles rang out and the camp was astir ; and the camels, groaning, as their habit is, were loaded. The cavalry set out, slowly feeling through the gloom for a possible foe ; and so, stumbling over stones, and sinking into sand, the soldiers made a good part of the required distance ere full daylight, and cheated the hot hours of their prey.

One more terrible day was before them ; twenty-one miles did they cover between dawn and dark, and many a face was white with fatigue when the halting-place was reached. Life had become a hideous dream of everlasting toil ; each day was like the one that had gone before, and the one that was to follow, full of an incessant monotonous movement that was hardly forgotten in sleep ere it recommenced once more.

Ronald's servant, a young lad from Inverness, felt it terribly. He was not strong,

and though he would not report himself unable for duty, he looked daily paler and thinner. On the evening of this longest march he came to Ronald and proposed to clean his sword and pistol.

“I don’t think they need it to-night,” said he. “You’re looking knocked up, Mackenzie; you’d much better go to the doctor.”

“Oh, I’ll do very well, sir. If you’d give me the pistol, sir; I’ve nothing to do.”

“Very well, there it is; but you’ll find it all right, for I cleaned it myself.”

Ronald went away to dinner, and thought no more of his pistol; but towards night a sudden shot was heard, and by-and-by they reported that Private Mackenzie was dead.

“He’s been queer a’ day, sir,” said the man who had marched next him; “I thoct he was wrang in the heid, he was that strange like.”

“But what ailed him?” said Ronald,

shocked at this sudden loss: he had liked the lad, too.

“I don’t know, sir; he seemed fair dune like wi’ the marchin’, that’s a’ I heard him speak o’.”

So Private Mackenzie was hastily buried by the side of the road, and with daylight the order of march continued as usual. Not that the days were altogether distressing, nor the spirits of the men constantly depressed. If they were overweary at night, they were cheery and blithe after a sleep; and day after day the pipers played stirring quicksteps that lightened the hearts and aided the feet of those that heard them.

At last on the eighth day, as the general had desired, the one hundred and thirty-six miles were ended, and Khelat-i-Ghilzai was reached, and found to be all safe, and its plucky little garrison quite at its ease.

“We needn’t have been in such an awful hurry after all,” grumbled a tired officer,

as he threw himself down on the ground to rest."

"It's so much the better, though, for the fellows in Kandahar. If they can get any news at all of us, they must be feeling pretty cheery by this time."

"Yes, for we've only four more marches to do."

"Whether they hear of us or not, Ayooob must be getting nervous. I hope he'll wait for us, that's all!"

"I'll tell you what—some of us will have to fight him barefoot, unless the road's uncommonly good from this to Kandahar," said Ronald, looking sadly at his boots.

"Yes, the boots are pretty far through. We'll have to put on Affghan *pattis*," said an officer, "or grass shoes."

"Yes, if you can get them, but there are no *jutiwallahs* (shoemakers) on the roadside. There are a good many men with sore feet by this time."

"I should think so," murmured a sub-lieutenant, hobbling away ; "mine are sore enough, I know, and I rode part of the last march."

"Well, there's a halt to-morrow," said Ronald, "and that should pick us up before the next start."

"You don't need picking up," said another, enviously, "you look as though this kind of thing agreed with you!"

"I'm not sure that it doesn't; I'm fit enough, at any rate," replied Ronald, whose early training had made him better able to bear the fatigue than many of his brother officers.

Some of them indeed, during their life in the Indian plains, had never by any chance walked a step if they could ride, and it was not to be wondered at that they suffered a good deal from fatigue, in spite of the improvement in their physical condition, brought about by the active

habits and sparer food to which they were forced to accustom themselves during the campaign. Captain Badger's rubicund face in particular was some shades less rosy, nor did his uniform fit him as closely as when he started from Cabul: long marches did not suit his constitution, and he was heard to wish that he had exchanged into a regiment at home—a wish that some of his brother officers secretly echoed.

The four marches which now divided the army from Kandahar were accomplished in as many days; and there General Roberts and his 10,000 men arrived on the 28th of August, having come no less than 302 miles in twenty days.

The general was carried in a litter now, too ill of fever to ride, but not too ill to make his plans, and have them executed as coolly as ever.

Kandahar was safe, and every man felt relieved when the bright flashes of the

heliograph signalled the good news. Other good news there was also : Ayoob meant to fight, and though he had moved off from before the city, it was only to take up a stronger position than before, among the low hills that lie near it.

“ We shall be able to lick him after all,” said Ronald, with a subdued fierceness in his tone that struck his companions ; “ I thought he’d have slipped through our fingers.”

“ What a fellow you are for fighting, Bennett ! One would think you had a personal spite against Ayoob. I never saw you so keen about thrashing those Cabul scoundrels.”

“ Wasn’t I ? Oh, well, I suppose one wants to make an end of the affair, and this ought to be about the finish of it,” said Ronald, with an attempt at a laugh. He would not for worlds have had any one suspect that he had indeed a personal

interest in the coming combat, for it seemed to him that he would be avenging Muriel's husband, and he wished that for a few hours he could have exchanged the sword which would in all likelihood remain unstained, for the rifle with which he might have done execution on the foe he hated.

When the news of the disaster had reached Cabul, the names of the killed had been imperfectly given, and he had been uncertain as to Leslie's fate; but on the 27th, when two or three officers rode out with a small escort from the city of Kandahar to the camp, he had quickly learnt the truth. One of the wounded had seen Leslie making a desperate stand in an enclosure; and though Ronald heard as yet but few details, enough was told to fire him with a bitter desire for revenge.

He hardly remembered, as a less chivalrous man might have done, that Muriel was wife no longer, but a widow, so young

that she might well marry again, and that he himself was not now outside the pale of her society : he only thought of her in tears and misery, and of her gallant husband struck down without hope or help in a hole from which there was no escape. Enough had reached the ears of the men for them to share the same temper ; and the general, as he scanned their faces, recognised upon them that look which was once aptly described in the Mutiny as “ the look the Sahibs wear when they don’t mean to turn back.”

Ayoob’s troops were full of fanatical confidence : they had beaten the infidels once, and they meant to do it again. Ayoob himself was risking everything on one throw, and he knew he was to win or lose a kingdom ; but neither fanatics nor prince could stand before the determined courage that animated every soldier in Roberts’s gallant little force.

How they fought and won the battle of the 1st of September has been often told. Men of the garrison stole out the day before and whispered terrible things of the Ghazis, forgetting that the soldiers of Sherepore had faced them many a time.

“Wait till we meet them,” said a sturdy little Ghoorkha, clapping a lanky, grave-looking Bombay sepoy on the back; “we don’t care for your Ghazis,”—and he turned for confirmation to his comrades, who echoed his laugh.

But the Bombay man only shook his head: it was useless for him to argue with these mad fellows, who, at the command of their madder general, were rushing into the jaws of death. *Kismet!* There would be terrible times for him and his companions in Kandahar when the mighty warriors of Ayoob’s army should have devoured this too confident force!

And they were going to attack the face

of the Kotal too, the great fortress in which the enemy's guns were strongly planted and the flower of his men were hidden. Certainly destruction would overwhelm them ! So thought the disheartened spectators in Kandahar, not perceiving that the front attack was but a feint, and that away where a village crowned a low mound, troops were working round so as to turn the right flank of the foe.

Bitter work it was about that village, where every house was loopholed and every garden walled, and where, in every available shelter, desperate men fought for their lives. Hotter and hotter grew the fire, and the men of the 2d went down fast, caught in a narrow channel where volleys fired by unseen defenders from the loopholes tore through their ranks.

Down went more than one officer in the act of cheering on the men ; but their losses only served to exasperate them, and at last,

with a final cheer of defiance, they dashed at the wall, and with their own rifles thrust into the loopholes, shot down the Ghazis inside. Those of the defenders that rushed out were met in hand-to-hand conflict; and Ronald, carried away by fierce excitement, fought his way with his men right through the crowded channel, hardly conscious the while that his left arm was wounded and covered with blood.

So far, things had gone well; but Ayooob made a last stand beside his guns on the other side of a deep water-course. Again it fell to the lot of the 2d to disperse them, and, fixing bayonets, they charged, cheering the while across the *nullah*, and the enemy broke and fled. Round then on to the retreating masses came another brigade, and swept along the edge of the water-courses, away to the empty camp where abandoned guns and deserted tents told of a precipitate flight.

“*Kismet!*” said the Bombay sepoy again, with a sigh of relief, and went down from his safe post of observation behind a sand-bag to his mid-day meal of rice and pease. The mad general had not been overwhelmed, and these newly arrived soldiers were men of redoubtable strength. Nevertheless if they had defeated the Ghazis, and restored peace and comfort to his soul, it must be because the thing had been ordained. Was it not ordained, too, that he himself should be unlike them, and should feel his heart melt within him at the sight of the wild warriors who fought under the green banners! *Kismet*—of course it was, and no one could alter these matters.

The Bombay sepoy dined well that day, and felt, as he thought over the miserable time he had spent in Kandahar, that he deserved much from the English Government that made him a soldier.

## CHAPTER XX.

## HOME WITH HONOURS.

WHEN Ronald returned to camp after the fight, and resigned himself to the surgeon's hands, he found that his usual luck had not deserted him, for the wound in his arm was pronounced to be a mere scratch.

Borrowing a pony from a brother officer, he set out some days later for the field of Maiwand, along with a party sent to inspect the field and identify and bury the dead.

It was a sight that as long as he lived he would never forget. He had seen other battle-fields, and had grown accustomed to the agonies that are shadows to the fiery

light of victory ; but where the army of Cabul had marched it had been to success, and there were honour and fame as well as regret for those who died to secure it. How different were the feelings with which the detachment now sent out surveyed the broken ground, the deep *nullah*, the close enclosures where our soldiers had perished in all the shame and terror of helpless defeat !

Very grim and stern were the faces of officers and men as they moved about the field, now passing the long lines of horses that had drawn the guns gaily into action, now crushing under their feet hundreds of empty cartridges that showed where a persistent fire had been poured upon the gathered thousands of the foe, now shrinking from a carelessly made pit, protruding out of which some blood-stained cap or more terrible shrivelled limb told of the ghastlier mass below.

Here, again, was a mud-wall, behind

which brave hearts had rallied desperately, and died facing the enemy, as the dark stains along its surface plainly showed; and yonder, farther away, was a tract of graves, where Affghan dead lay gathered together in long lines that told how dearly some of our troops had sold their lives.

Here, again, a huge cairn of stones was piled by careful hands to mark the spot where the guns fought on so long,—six against thirty, till, their daring leader shot, and the retreat begun, pursued and pursuers surging down upon them, an officer who remained bid them limber up and retire. Their gallantry, like that of the brave 66th, shed the only light that pierced the gloom of that dark and fatal day.

The graves—our graves—were gradually made more seemly, stones piled over some, with round-shot found lying on the field for monument. One large pit was opened, and the poor remains laid out for decent

burial. It was with surprise that the soldiers saw, as they removed the loose sand and fragments of a wall that had been hastily thrown down to fill the space, that the dead had not been stripped by the pillaging hands of the villagers—it was possible even to identify many; and it was soon made clear that here lay that gallant band of the 66th, of whom the natives themselves told that they had fought so well, and with such high bearing, that though their numbers dwindled one by one, not a man of Ayoob's Ghazis, flushed though they were with triumph, dared advance to cut them down.

Man by man they fell within the little garden in which they made their desperate stand: help or hope there was none, but for the honour of England, and by their torn colours, they could die facing the foe. It was all that was left them to do, and this they did with an heroic splendour grander than the brightest courage that

ever carried on a soldier in the glory of a winning fight. Without comrades to cheer, or the hope of reward to incite, they stood, till only a scant dozen remained, and these with a wild English cheer dashed out to meet death on the Affghan blades.

In hushed tones the work of identification went on, and Ronald Bennett watched it with aching heart, scanning each poor stiffened corpse in search of the well-known face that he remembered so strong and so gay. At last it came, and he stepped forward and reverently took off his cap as he said, "That is Captain Leslie of the 66th."

Round the left arm was twisted a remnant of the colours, as though he had last had charge of them, and with gentle hands Ronald removed a scrap of the tattered embroidery.

As they lifted the body, something caught his eye at the throat where the coat was open—a tiny chain, so small as to be easily

overlooked. A locket hung to it, and that, too, Ronald removed and undertook to send home to the dead man's wife. Then the grave was covered in seemly fashion, and their task over, the soldiers paid what honour they could to the dead.

To the slow and stately strains of the Dead March, the soldiers' requiem, a hundred men of the Fusiliers came along to the spot where the dead lay thickest, and the attendant chaplains read the services amid a solemn stillness. In as solemn silence the troops presented arms, there was a moment's hushed pause, and then they wheeled and returned quietly to camp. No rattling volley and no joyous music were allowed here as at an ordinary soldier's funeral, but in sorrowful silence the dead of Maiwand were left to their long repose.

When it was found that Ronald knew both Mrs Leslie and her father, the task of writing to them naturally fell to him, and

by next mail he forwarded to Sir Duncan both the relics he had carried away, and as full an account as he could give of the place and manner of Leslie's death. It was a hard task, and more than once he laid down his pen, feeling with keen pain the suffering that his letter must cause; yet he judged — and rightly — that the bereaved hearts at home would long for any detail, however slight, that would fill in the terrible blank that was so hard to bear.

Years after, he saw again the locket that he had sent home, and only then he knew that it contained a miniature of Muriel, sorely defaced and faded, and a lock of her soft fair hair.

Many days elapsed before he could shake off the painful impression that had been made upon him by his visit to that stricken field; and fever seizing upon him, he was soon laid up completely, and in his delirium would cry out that Muriel was in danger,

and would struggle till his strength was worn out. Miserably weak he was when the fever was subdued, and having been twice wounded besides, he was despatched on sick leave for a year to England.

He started as soon as he was able to travel, though the movement of the litter in which he was carried, amid the dust and heat, almost brought on a relapse. By-and-by, however, when he reached the railway, he suffered less, and journeyed on by easy stages down country towards Bombay.

Having arrived at Allahabad, where he was to pass a night or two, he was sitting wearily in the verandah of the hotel, when a buggy was driven up to the door, and a gentleman alighted whom he had often seen at Hubblepore, and whose wife had been one of the ladies chiefly instrumental in securing his election into the theatrical club. He could not at first see if it were she who sat back in the buggy, loosely holding the

reins, and he was both too shy and too tired to move. Presently, however, impatient for her husband to return, she leaned forward and caught sight of the tired face in the verandah. She gazed for a moment, uncertain of his identity, and then the old bright smile lit up her eyes, and Ronald, lifting his hat, advanced.

“Why, Mr Bennett, I should hardly have known you; how ill you look. Where are you going? Why didn’t you come to my house?”

“I’m going home on sick leave, Mrs Emerson, and had no idea you were here. I only remain here to-night and to-morrow.”

“Then you’ll come with me at once. Oh, how lucky I saw you; don’t say ‘but.’ Tom, my dear, here’s Mr Bennett; of course he must stay with us?”

“Bless my soul! of course he must. My dear fellow, let me congratulate you, though, I must say, you don’t look like being

congratulated," said the worthy man; and before many minutes, Ronald was established in the buggy in Mr Emerson's place, and was driven off to a comfortable bungalow, where for the next forty-eight hours he was petted and fed on dainty food, very welcome to a campaigner, and encouraged and cared for as the sick are cared for, by the kindly cheery Englishwomen who make India their home.

It was a fresh and wonderful pleasure to him, for it was not only a great relief to be once more in a comfortable house, and in the society of a charming woman, but it was also the first occasion on which he had an opportunity of enjoying the results of his promotion. It made him realise more vividly that he had not only undergone a complete social rehabilitation, but that, if he cared, as he undoubtedly did, he might now be intimate in circles to which, had he been a Scotch country minister he could

never have expected to attain. Something of the old glow filled his veins as he felt that his life might yet be fuller of stir and interest than he had ever dared to hope during the long years that he had passed in the ranks.

The Emersons did not neglect to provide him with creature comforts when he left ; for an Indian hostess fulfils to the letter the advice to speed the parting as well as to welcome the coming guest, and as he passed by the gloomy fort and across the muddy river he looked back at the distant cantonments, and reflected that his short stay there had been a better tonic than any of which he had partaken at the doctor's hands.

He hurried on as rapidly as he could to Bombay, impatient for the day when he should again breathe Scottish air ; and it was with a feeling of relief that he found himself once more on board a trooper, the

same as it happened that had brought him out but a few years ago, when he was only a corporal, and looked forward to the rank of colour-sergeant as almost the ultimatum of his ambition. It was a pleasantly changed position for him now; and very thoroughly did he appreciate his share of a cabin, which, dark and hot as it was, was a comfortable place when compared with the suffocating troop-deck where he had passed many a restless night. He had arranged his possessions, read the names of his companions on the door, and was going up to the deck, when he found himself face to face with Captain Badger.

"I did not know you were going home," said he, in surprise.

"Didn't you? I left after you, and I arrived this morning. I'm going to command the depot. Suppose you'll be sent there when your leave's out."

"Suppose I shall," said Ronald, regret-

ting Badger's presence, and still more the prospect of serving under him.

"You come from the neighbourhood of Inverallan, I think?" said the latter to him one night, as they lounged on the deck.

"Yes."

"Ah! Know the Hardwicks at Broomieknowe?"

"I have met Mr Hardwicke, and seen his sister for a moment."

"Ah! Nice place. Plenty of money there. Next-door neighbours of the Forbeses'. Are they intimate?"

"Can't say."

"Mrs Leslie might do worse than marry young Hardwicke?" continued Badger, glancing shrewdly at his companion. "She's young, and rich, and pretty, and the places 'march,' as the Scotch say."

"I suppose they do."

"Do what?—Oh, march; yes, of course

they do. You wouldn't approve of the match, eh?

"Really, I never thought of it. Leslie hasn't been dead a couple of months yet," returned Ronald, in a tone of disgust.

"That's no reason why Hardwicke shouldn't keep his weather-eye open, or any-one—else—either," returned Badger, slowly, between the puffs of his cigar. "I know the Hardwicks. Was rather sweet upon Laura once, and mean to improve my opportunities. A neighbourhood with two heiresses in it should be attractive. I'm sure you must agree with me in that."

"I've no doubt you found it so."

"And so do you, of course—uncommon bad taste if you didn't. Oh, of course you don't *say* so. A friend of the family, and all that sort of thing; sympathise with Mrs Leslie, and so forth. But I dare say you and I'll meet both at Inverallan and Broomieknowe. Fair field for both of us

and no favour, you know," said Badger, with a wink ; and Ronald, who could have struck him with pleasure, was forced to content himself with turning on his heel in silence.

Somehow or another, the impression got abroad in the ship that Ronald was going home with the intention of marrying an heiress, and one or two even knew her name. It was an old flame—a queer story—as good as a novel ; and when one of them hazarded a chaffing remark, and Ronald gave him the lie direct, and a row ensued, nobody believed his angry disclaimers ; they only thought that his annoyance sprang from the truth of their assertions.

Unfortunately, the depot of the 2d was just then quartered at Stirling, and Ronald felt that he would be to a certain extent in Badger's power. True, he was on leave, and need never enter the castle ; nor, if he could possibly help it, should Badger darken the doors of the manse. Still, if he put his

threat into execution, and managed to stay at Broomieknowe, it would be impossible altogether to avoid him. That Muriel or her father would ever tolerate his presence at Inverallan, Ronald could not believe; for he did not know the amount of self-sacrifice that is sometimes claimed by the customs of society.

In London Ronald put himself under the guidance of one of his cabin companions—a pleasant and kindly fellow, named Harris; and after getting the necessary outfit, and presenting himself at one of the Duke's *levées*, he prepared, with a glad heart, for his journey home.

“Going down to-night, Bennett? So am I; better travel together—the limited, of course, from Euston,” said Badger, meeting him with his friend at the door of a tailor's shop.

Ronald made some indistinct reply, and when he and Harris had passed on, inquired

how he could avoid the unwelcome proposal.

"I was going from Euston, but I won't now. What's the other line,—King's Cross, isn't it?"

"Yes; 8.30 will suit you very well. I'm going by that myself on Thursday. That's not a nice fellow, I should think," said the other, with a gesture in Badger's direction.

"I detest him," said Ronald, abruptly.

"I can fancy that. He talked a good deal about you on board ship,—you and a lady; it was all lies I suppose."

"Every word of it; I can safely say that."

"I guessed as much. Do you know, I think it's a pity duelling isn't allowed sometimes. Nothing else will stop some fellows' tongues."

"Duelling's too dignified for that kind of rascal. I think it should be allowable to knock a liar down," said Ronald, smiling.

“My dear fellow, you stand six feet in your stockings, and that kind of combat would suit you admirably ; but what should *I* do ? Now with weapons I could face you, if I were the object you wished to demolish,” said his friend, who was some inches shorter ; and as they talked and jested, Badger and his sins were forgotten.

When Ronald got out, tired and dusty, at the Stirling station next morning, he was greatly surprised to see Sir Duncan Forbes hastening up to him. The old man seized him by both hands, and greeted him as though he had been one of his own kin.

“You are not going away anywhere, I hope, Sir Duncan,” said Ronald, when the first hurried words were over ; “it is early for you to be here.”

“Going away ! My dear boy, I came in to fetch you. You don’t suppose you are to be allowed to slip in at the back door quietly, do you ? The whole village is on the look-

out for you. There—you needn't look so bewildered,—come along to the carriage."

"But my luggage," began Ronald.

"All right, sir; it's in the Inverallan cart, sir; very glad to see you home, sir," said a porter, whose face had long been familiar on that platform.

"Thank you," said Ronald, more and more surprised; and he let Sir Duncan lead him off to where the open carriage and well-known grey horses were waiting, and was dimly aware that more than one cap was touched to him, and that in fact his return was observed by many eyes. But he did not know that the west coast train was in, and that Captain Badger, drinking a brandy-and-soda in the refreshment-room, had also been a spectator of his welcome.

While they drove rapidly homewards, Sir Duncan talked of the various changes time had wrought in the neighbourhood, told him how bravely his mother had borne herself

during the war, and with what pride she was awaiting his return, and how joyfully the Gazette containing his name had been read in the village.

As they swept round the last corner and along the straight half mile below the beeches, Ronald remembered vividly the day on which he had walked there for the first time in the uniform on which even old Jamie Paterson had looked askance. He remembered the sense of failure, the regrets that had clung about him, and the dogged resolve that had seemed to be his only hope.

Now he saw that the village street was crowded on either side, and the sun streamed brightly down between trees brilliant with the late tints of autumn, down on the moving figures and waving caps, for presently a shout went up as the carriage dashed on to the manse.

There, over the low gate, rose a great arch of scarlet and purple dahlias, holly-

hocks, and laurels ; and there, below the “welcome” that blazed in rich colours above their heads, stood the father and mother, the sunlight shining on their white hair and on the joyful tears that dimmed their eyes.

Ronald sprang out, and even as he clasped his mother in his arm, uncovered his head, and knew that his father’s voice solemnly blessed him. Then the three passed into the house, while with true tact the crowd of gazers went quietly away, and Sir Duncan drove home to Inverallan.

## CHAPTER XXI.

## AD FINEM FIDELIS.

AND so Ronald Bennett woke to find himself famous in his own little corner of the earth. His genuine astonishment delighted his friends more than if he had been better prepared for his welcome—it was so fresh, so unaffected, with a touch of humour in lip and eye that took every one by storm. When he walked down the street with Jamie Paterson, the very children followed him as though he had been some strange being. He broke into hearty laughter when, crossing the road, he looked up at the dahlia arch, and turning to them said, with portentous gravity, “Bairns! wha wad ever hae thocht

that Ronald Bennett wad hae come to that ?”

“It wasna to be expectit, there’s nae doubt o’ that,” replied Jamie, with a twinkle in his eyes of affectionate pride, as he glanced up at the tall figure beside him.

“Ye’ll be carryin’ a’ the lads awa’ wi’ ye, Maister Bennett,” said a “gudewife,” who had often given him a stick of “blackman” in the days when he was a “toddling wean ;” “they’re a’ for the sodgerin’, noo that you’ve come hame an offisher.”

“Are they, Mrs Grey ? Then you just tell them to mind the old Scots proverb, ‘War’s sweet to them that never tried it.’”

“Ay, ay, it’s a wiselike sayin’ yon.”

“Hoot, toot !” interrupted Jamie, “ye suld leave ither folk to say that ; ‘hawks suldna pike out hawks’ een,’ ye ken.”

“Ay, Jamie, true enough ; but ‘leal heart never lee’d,’—there’s proverb for proverb. I’ll take recruits for the 2d with all my

heart, if they know what they're after ; but I'll have no 'lees' about it."

"That's vera richt—vera richt indeed, Maister Bennett. I'm no sayin' anything again' the army ; but the lads think it's a simmer-day wark, and I ken weel eneuch it's no that. It's no every sodger gets a commission like you."

"No ; and few fellows have such luck as I. I often wonder why I had so many chances. It's a hard life certainly ; but, by Jove, war's a grand game too !" said Ronald, his eye brightening as he spoke ; "I wouldn't have missed some of those actions for a good deal."

"Ay, but then ye're safe oot o' them, my lad," said Jamie ; "ye'd no look sae doom's proud o' them if ye'd left a leg or an arm oot yonder."

"I daresay not, Jamie," replied Ronald, laughing ; "so we come back to what I said at first—you know the saying,—‘Gang to

the wars ! said the fule ; I'm no sic a fule as that.' Gude day to ye, Mrs Grey ; keep your laddies at hame, and tell them commissions for the ranks are no just as common as blackberries."

"I'll do that, Maister Bennett, though there's little gude speakin' to my Wullie : mony's the time I've tellt him that he's aye for 'cryin' sheuch to his chuckies afore they're oot o' the egg.'"

"Hoots, woman ! he wadna be a bairn if he had mair sense. Mithers are aye lookin' for grosets afore the flowers are aff the busses," said Jamie, as he walked off, keeping as usual the last word.

Thus the village talk went on, and it seemed to Ronald that the day of his arrival, with its surprises, its greetings, its emotions, was the longest he had ever spent, so much was crowded into those few hours. But even while he responded heartily to all the claims made upon him, he never lost con-

sciousness of the one thought,—to-morrow he should see Muriel Leslie.

She had written a little note to Mrs Bennett, on her father's behalf as well as her own, saying that they would not of course interfere with the first day of Ronald's return, but that on the next they hoped to see the trio from the manse at dinner. "And tell Ronald," she added, "that I wish he could spare me an hour in the morning. I know he has written everything he had to tell; but I should like to hear it again from him quietly before we meet in the evening."

"You will go up early, dear, will you not?" said Mrs Bennett.

"Yes, mother, of course; but I'd rather face another battle. It was bad enough to write about that business; but to speak of it, and to her—poor girl, poor girl!" said Ronald, turning away; and his mother guessed that the coming interview would be a severe ordeal to both.

No one could have looked less like a newly welcomed hero than Ronald, as he set out with a depressed and anxious countenance for Inverallan. It was hard that this his first interview with her must be so painful, and he wished it could have taken place anywhere else than in the castle. It would be a dark memory among the bright and happy associations that for him clung about the place.

As though some such thought had occurred to Muriel herself, she did not receive him in either of the rooms in which they habitually sat, but in a turret-room off the library, where she had arranged her writing-table and her newly acquired books and papers concerning the estate.

Ronald, strong fellow as he was, was trembling as he entered, and could only bow silently over her proffered hand. The sight of the grave face, looking pale between the white cap and the long black dress,

moved him as nothing else had ever done ; but Muriel, however, stirred by this meeting with one fresh from the scene she continually pictured to herself, retained her composure, and spoke in tones that were only somewhat lower than usual.

“ I am very happy to see you safe home, Ronald ; your mother’s heart will be light again.”

Still Ronald said nothing. If he could have knelt at her feet, have kissed the hem of her garment, he would have done so ; but to speak was impossible,—what could he say that was worth the saying ?

“ We have all been so pleased, so proud, of your success,” she continued, kindly.

“ You—the kindness—has made it worth more than I could have thought possible. I did not value it half so much before,” stammered Ronald.

“ No, my father told me you had no idea we had thought so much of it.” She paused

for a moment. "It was good of you to come so early,—I wanted so much to hear,—tell me everything,—anything you can."

Ronald looked at her for an instant, and as he saw the longing and grief in her face, he turned sharply away to the window.

"I wrote to you. Tell you everything! Why, men could not talk of it all; and to tell you—*you*,—oh, it is too horrible! I can't do it!" he said, in broken sentences.

There was a moment's silence, then Muriel moved towards him.

"It is unkind of me to ask it, and yet I do ask—just because you are such an old friend; I could not bear it from a stranger. If you knew how I want to know—to see the place in my mind's eye! Ronald, if you had lost—some one you loved,—would you not long to see their grave? And I never shall see it!" cried she, with a sob.

Then Ronald mastered himself, and without moving, without looking at her, told in

a low, even tone, all that he could find to tell, describing the enclosure in which that last stand had been made, the spot where Leslie had fallen, the group of English graves. Once he heard her sob and stir, and guessed that she was crouched down on the chair behind him, but still he went steadily on. When he had finished, he waited there; and presently she came to him, and put her hand on his sleeve.

“Thank you. I know this has been a hard thing to do, but you will not regret it, for it has been the greatest kindness to me; it will make me less restless. Now we will not speak of it again, and we shall meet this evening just as usual.”

“Yes.” He glanced at the delicate white fingers lying near his own brown hand, and raised them gently, just touching them with his lips; then he waited silently while she left the room, and made his way homeward, drawing a deep breath of relief.

“ Was it very trying ? How did she bear it ? ” asked Mrs Bennett.

“ Don’t ask me—thank heaven it is over ! and, mother, she said we were not to speak of it again. Is she always so pale and thin ? ”

“ She is looking far better than she did ten days ago. It was the long anxiety that broke her down. They were so thoroughly happy together. ”

“ Yes,—why should he be taken and I be left ? I would have died to save her happiness ! ”

“ My son ! ”

“ Mother, forgive me,—even for her who is the woman above all women, I ought not to have forgotten you,” said Ronald, kneeling down beside the old arm-chair where his mother now passed many hours.

She laid her hand on his hair,—“ My dear boy, is it so with you—still ? ”

“Could it be so once, for such a woman, and could one change, mother? While she was a wife, I could only think of her as—well, as one might think of a queen; but now,—oh, mother, mother, if I could but comfort her!”

“But, Ronald, your life will be intolerable if you stay here, so near her, and feeling as you do.”

“Oh no,” he replied lightly, rising to his feet again. “I’m not a love-sick boy now, and I am strong enough, I hope, to behave rationally. I know that she is my one love, and that I shall never be anything to her but what she called me—God bless her for it!—to-day,—an old friend. Do you think I would not rather be near her, with the chance of sometimes pleasing her, or perhaps cheering her, than be out of reach of her altogether?”

“You are wonderfully changed, Ronald. I can hardly believe that you are the same

as the silent boy who was angry because I even guessed his secret."

"It is the difference between boy and man, mother. I was a conceited little blockhead then. I confess I am a little surprised at myself, for I had no thought, when I came in, of speaking in this way, but I know the value of a mother better, you see; and besides, I am sure of my ground with *her*. Now having said so much, let us bury this too, and speak of it no more. Is it agreed?"

"Certainly, if you wish it, my dear boy. Ah, Ronald, if you had trusted me long ago, as you have done to-day!"

"Then I shouldn't have been a soldier or got a commission, or had an arch of dahlias put up for me, nor been able to do even so little as I have done for *her*. 'What is, is,' said the wise man, 'and what is, is best.'"

"So it seems, my dear," said Mrs Bennett. She was so happy, poor soul, that

she would have agreed to any proposition if her boy had advanced it.

When the trio from the manse went up to dinner that evening, Muriel received them cheerfully, shaking hands with Ronald as though they had not met before. There were signs of tears about her eyes, but her smile was sweet and her voice clear and steady.

Miss Alicia, who had not seen Ronald in the morning, was very curious about him. It was hard for her to realise that the boy she had disliked and rebuked, had earned well-merited honour; and she had already been indulging in speculations as to his future, and wondering if he could marry the rich daughter of a coal-owner in the neighbourhood.

“She’s dreadfully plain and vulgar,” she remarked to her brother as the door-bell rang, “but with her money, he would be floated at once.”

Sir Duncan smiled. "Wait till you see him, my dear. I don't think Miss M'Gillivray would suit him."

"Oh no, she would *never* do, I'm afraid," said Miss Alicia in a low voice, as she saw the guests coming up the long drawing-room. That tall handsome man, greeting Muriel with such courteous ease, would certainly not look at poor loud-voiced Janet, even though Janet's bawbees were considerable. She would never have guessed him to be her old acquaintance.

Ronald was thoroughly happy to-night, and showed in consequence at his best. He was ready to answer questions about the campaign, yet never spoke too much on the subject. Keenly interested in current events, he had something to say on most topics; and James Bennett, seeing his son for the first time under the influence of genial society, no longer wondered that "the laddie" was a favourite, and secretly

resolved that he would try to draw him out as pleasantly at his own table. "Perhaps," thought he, "I've been harsh with him. Old folk forget that the young ones are growing up, and we silence them, after they have the hearts and heads of men and women."

"Mr Bennett," said Sir Duncan, interrupting his reflections, "do you know this boy of yours once refused to sit at my table in his private's uniform?"

"Did he indeed, Sir Duncan! What was that for, Ronald?"

"I knew Sir Duncan, with his usual kindness, wished to help me to keep my self-respect, and I was so well aware of my own folly, that I respected both myself and him too much to come. I did not deserve the honour," replied Ronald, with a smile.

"Well, the honour lies the other way now, I assure you. I consider it an honour

to entertain any one who has taken a gallant part in this war. Here's your health, my dear boy; the ladies will drink that toast before they go."

"You are all much too good to me," said Ronald, flushing, his eyes fixed upon the peach in his plate. It seemed that he had not looked up, yet the flush had not risen to his brow at Sir Duncan's words, but when his rapid glance saw Muriel lift her glass to her lips. Nevertheless he let her pass him unnoticed as he held the door open, and it was Miss Alicia who said a word about the toast as she went out.

When the gentlemen came to the drawing-room, Ronald carried sundry parcels which had been laid in the hall.

"I ventured to bring home one or two trifles for your acceptance," he said, displaying them. "This clasp is of jade, Miss Forbes, and came from a house in Cabul."

"How very quaint! Is this really for

me? How good and kind of you, Mr Bennett!" exclaimed she, greatly pleased. Ronald smiled. These were indeed changed days!

"May I ask you to accept these," he said, turning to Muriel. "The cups are Russian, I believe, and the tray is Punjabi steel-work. There are no handles, you see, so your tea cannot be very hot."

"Thank you, Ronald—I shall value them very much," said Muriel, simply; "they are beautiful."

"And this," continued Ronald, removing the paper, "is an Affghan shield, Sir Duncan, picked up at Charaziab."

"Why, it's the very match to the Highland shields in the hall!" said Sir Duncan, examining the pattern marked out in brass knobs on the steel.

"I thought of that. To tell the truth, there are a good many points in which the Affghans remind one of the Scottish High-

landers or Borderers—the midnight cattle-raids, the love of fighting, the clan feuds, and, as you see, the style of shield, and even of weapons,” said Ronald, who had left at home, lest Muriel should shrink from the sight of it, an ivory-handled sword with engraved blade, intended for Sir Duncan.

“Come, come—I protest against this,” said Mrs Bennett; “you’re not going to put my ancestors on a level with the Affghans, I hope.”

“I’m afraid, mother, there are many resemblances between a Ghazi and what your ancestors called ‘a pretty man,’” returned Ronald. “Both have rather doubtful views about the rights of property, both stand up for clan and country, and both would fight and die like heroes.”

“And a very ‘pretty’ character that is,” said the old lady, smiling. “If you’ve nothing worse to say of your Ghazis, I wouldn’t mind calling cousins with them.”

“ Well, then—we’ll leave the rest unsaid,—the black side of both characters,” replied Ronald. “ I’ll admit the Ghazi comes out a good deal the blackest, for I doubt if he has ever learnt that there’s honour among thieves.”

When the time came to say good-night, Sir Duncan told Ronald he must be a frequent visitor. “ Remember there’s always room for you at lunch and dinner, and I expect you to drop in often for a chat. I’ve told your mother the same thing, but she has invariably some good reason for staying at home and carrying Muriel down to her; but you’re an idle man, with no parish visiting and doctoring to keep you, so you must find your way to me.”

“ Very well, Sir Duncan, if you give me the run of your library, as of old, perhaps I may come too often.”

“ No fear of that—no fear of that,” said Sir Duncan; and Miss Forbes added her

invitation—"Indeed, Mr Bennett, I shall be very glad if you will come and interrupt my brother as often as you can. He sits too long in that library."

"And have you no word to add, Muriel?" said her father.

"It is hardly needed, I think—Ronald knows he is always welcome," said she, with that kind smile that was so chilling, because it seemed to set her so far apart. Had she been more sorrowful, or even colder, Ronald would not have felt that there was such a distance between them; but this controlled cheerfulness indicated a depth and reserve of sorrow that made his heart ache for her. As soon as the guests had gone, Muriel retired, but Miss Forbes lingered with her brother.

"My dear Duncan, you might well laugh at the notion of Janet M'Gillivray! Why, Mr Bennett might marry *anybody*, with such a romantic history, and such

good looks! And then his manner—so distinguished! Dear, dear, who would have thought it?” cried she, in a flutter of excitement.

“Who would have thought you would ever be so charmed with him?” replied Sir Duncan.

“Who indeed? But how could I, or any one, tell that he had so much in him? though I always did think he had remarkably good eyes,” said Miss Forbes, who, like many women, never confessed that any event could take her entirely by surprise.

“You never admitted as much, then,” said Sir Duncan.

“Now, my dear brother, would you have had me tell Muriel that the boy was good-looking?”

“Certainly not, but there was nothing to prevent your telling me; and I think I have heard you call him——”

"Never mind what I called him then. I think you should ask Laura Hardwicke to meet him. We can't have dinner-parties yet, of course, but just in a quiet way."

"Oh, you think he might aspire to that, do you?"

"I tell you he might marry *anybody*. Laura is a pretty girl, and enormously rich, and her brother is a good man, though eccentric."

"Alicia, you are the most determined matchmaker I ever saw, and that is saying a good deal," returned Sir Duncan, laughing.

"Now, Duncan, I will take you into my confidence," said his sister, going up to him and tapping his arm with her fan. "I couldn't do so in old days, because you were so very—you held such——"

"I was so abominably obstinate and absurd, you mean. Well?"

"Well, you had peculiar ideas, but I

think they are modified a little now ; and so, as I said, I'll take you into my confidence. You had better help me to make up a match for that young man, or he'll be falling in love with—can you guess?—our Muriel ! I saw how he glanced at her when she drank his health. That, of course, would *never* do, — though she wouldn't look at him even months and months hence, poor darling ! — but one might try to spare him."

"But you said he might marry anybody."

"Oh yes,—I meant, of course, in reason, —anybody else, you know, but not Muriel."

"And why not Muriel?" said Sir Duncan slowly, with a twinkle in his eyes as he looked down at his sister.

"*Why — not — Muriel ?*" No italics could convey the tone in which Miss Forbes ejaculated these words.

“I repeat, why not? Two or three years hence,—why not?”

“Oh, if you say that——” Miss Forbes never finished that sentence. She mechanically took up her candle, accepted her brother’s laughing good-night without a word, and went to her room in a state of more complete bewilderment than she had ever dreamt of experiencing.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## FRIENDS AND FOES.

IN a day or two Ernest Hardwicke came to call at the manse, and invited Ronald to come up to luncheon. He accepted the invitation readily, for he remembered gratefully their meeting at the restaurant in Edinburgh, and knew that a very kindly feeling had grown up between the young man and Mrs Bennett, especially since the death of old Mrs Hardwicke.

Mrs Bennett, however, had never thoroughly liked Laura Hardwicke, who now presided in her brother's house; and Ronald, on making her acquaintance, found that he shared the same impression. The young

lady had been as anxious as her brother to see him, and had intended to make him the lion of her garden-parties. She therefore received him with great *empressement*, and asked him girlish questions about his campaign, to which he replied politely, but without testifying any interest in her chatter. Slightly ruffled by his apparent preference for her brother's conversation, she tried in the course of the afternoon to patronise him, using a little air of command that she had found popular with certain of her acquaintances.

Ronald, however, maintained his imperturbability : his eye did not brighten, nor did a smile cross his face. He carried her garden-basket, held down rose-branches as she bade him, and admired the flowers; but when she gave him a beautiful bunch of Gloire de Dijon, he thanked her heartily, saying that such blossoms would be a delight to his mother for days.

Laura almost pouted as she bade him good morning ; and when her brother returned from the gate, he laughed at the expression of her face.

“ You don’t like the lion—eh, Laura ? ”

“ Lion ! You should call him a bear ! I hope you don’t mean to have him here often.”

“ Well, I like him. And you should remember that other people may wish to see the bear at your garden-parties, even though he won’t dance at your bidding. I think him a very intelligent, pleasant fellow.”

“ I should have called it more simple than intelligent of him to tell me he only cared for my flowers because his mother likes them,” said Laura, with a gleam in her dark eyes. “ Now if I had given those roses to Captain Badger or Mr Smith——”

“ Smith is a fool, and Badger—well, I am not sure what he is, but nothing very

good, I suspect. What curious creatures you women are! You are delighted with the first fop who can simper and talk twaddle to you, and you don't know a man when you see one," said he, meditatively.

"There now—I suppose you will think no one as good as your bear for the next few weeks," exclaimed Laura. "I know exactly how it will be. However silly *we* may be, we don't exalt one person at the expense of every one else."

"Do I do that? I didn't mean to," said Hardwicke, simply, and Laura looked at him affectionately.

"Oh, it's no use scolding you—you always give in; so there's no pleasure in finding fault. Bring the bear when you like, only lionise him yourself when you do so."

Hardwicke soon found that Ronald was a keen fisherman, and he at once gave him a permit for the trout-stream that ran

through the park at Broomieknowe. This was a great pleasure to him ; and day after day he would wander there with his rod, enjoying the pleasant shade of the beech-woods, and the lovely glimpses down the park glades, almost as much as the sport.

More than once, Laura and her brother, finding him there, brought lunch out to the river-side ; and occasionally, Laura passing him in her solitary walks, stopped to ask after the sport, and talk a while. She found him invariably the same ; and while in her heart she acknowledged to a certain respect for him, such as she did not usually feel, she was piqued at the absolute indifference of his manner.

“I might be eighty instead of twenty,” she said to herself—“he would be just as polite, only a little more attentive. Yes, I really believe he would be more attentive to an old woman than he is to me. He would think she needed help, and he would

“speak to her as he does to his mother, with that absurd air of deference. He isn’t a bit like anybody else one meets; but dear me, I suppose he is a very fine fellow, as Ernest says.”

Thus thought Laura, and by-and-by two little incidents threw light upon Ronald’s character, and made her observe him with increasing interest. She had met Captain Badger in Stirling, and he had not been slow to renew his old acquaintance, and had early made his appearance at Broomieknowe. He called one morning when she was alone, and she proposed to take him down to the stream where her brother and Ronald were fishing.

“You know Mr Bennett, by the by, I think? Isn’t he in your regiment?”

“Oh yes; is he here?” The tone was slighting enough to be noticeable.

“Yes. My brother likes him so much.”

“And Miss Hardwicke finds him the

soul of politeness and gallantry?" said the Captain, ironically.

"He is quite polite," said Laura, with a smile.

"Quite—and most complimentary. He must bore you dreadfully," said Badger, changing his tone, and looking at her with an air of sympathy.

"I see very little of him: he and my brother fish a great deal together. They seem to have plenty to say."

"No doubt. Of course, Bennett has a certain amount of cleverness, or he wouldn't be where he is; but he knows nothing of society—nothing whatever."

"No,—ah, here they are," said Laura, who had her own ideas on the subject, but was curious to see how Ronald and her companion would meet.

"How are you, Hardwicke? Ah, Bennett, you here! Why have you never been to look us up in the Castle?" said Badger,

with just a shade of difference in his voice as he turned from the one man to the other.

“I haven’t felt inclined. I’ll come some day,” replied Ronald. “Miss Hardwicke, your brother has caught the biggest trout we’ve had yet,—look at him.”

Laura looked, and saw more than the trout: these two did not like each other. And why did Badger never look people in the face? She did not remember noticing it before, but how his eyes turned from Bennett’s frank gaze! She would see how the land lay; and she talked on to Ronald, who answered her with more alacrity than usual, for the sight of Badger always roused him to keener attention and speech.

After a while Hardwicke put up his rod, and prepared to accompany the visitor back to lunch. “You had better come too, Bennett,” said he; “it’s too sunny now to go on.”

"No, thanks—not to-day," said Ronald.  
"I've got a sandwich with me, and I'll see if I can't beat that take of yours yet."

"Come in to tea, then, Mr Bennett," said Laura, inviting him for the first time.

"Thanks—you are very kind; but I shall be near home by that time, and my mother will complain if I leave her alone all day," replied Ronald.

"Well, good-bye, then; we shall see you again soon."

"Good-bye," he replied, lifting his cap; and giving Badger a farewell nod, he turned back to his fishing.

"Bennett is quite an acquisition," remarked Hardwicke; "he's a capital fisherman. Would you care to join us?"

"No, thanks. I never had patience for it; but I saw your lawn-tennis ground as I came up the avenue—if Miss Hardwicke would have a game, I should be delighted."

“Certainly ; we can go out after luncheon,” replied Laura.

“I have been out of ladies’ society so long that I find it doubly charming, though at any time I prefer it to standing with a rod in my hand by a river ; I am not made for solitude,” said Captain Badger to Laura, as he tightened the cords of the tennis-net, —and she wondered whether Ronald’s face had ever, for any one, worn that sort of look.

“Is there any talk of Bennett marrying, do you know ?” said the Captain in a pause, after a well-contested game,—he always allowed a lady to fancy that he was doing his best against her.

“Not that I ever heard.”

“Ah, I thought—I knew, in fact—that he meant to marry, and marry money. It’s necessary for him, poor fellow, in his peculiar position. It was lucky he escaped a match that he nearly made in the ranks.”

“Oh, was he engaged, then?”

“I can't say exactly, you know. Of course I could only hear of it through his applying for leave to marry. The girl was very pretty, but it would have been fatal to him now, and I suppose he threw her over. As it is, he may do well enough.”

“No doubt. Shall we try again? I must revenge myself.”

“And I shall submit willingly to be your victim. You are a beautiful player.”

Laura did not reply, but she played her best. She had a sudden desire to defeat her opponent that did not arise entirely from interest in the game. She did win, by one point, and was very gracious to him as they went in to tea—so gracious that the shrewd Captain Badger guessed there must be something behind. Was it possible that he had arrived only just in time? She did not like that bit of information about Bennett—of that he was

pretty sure; but he must feel his way carefully.

He was quite right—Laura did not like it. She had gradually become interested, almost against her will, in her brother's favourite, and now she was disappointed. She did not wish to be friends with him if he had ever intended to marry a soldier's daughter. She had fancied him a man of finer taste, who had a curiously chivalrous feeling towards women. Perhaps what she had taken for chivalry was a form of disappointed love—indifference instead of deference. How ridiculous she had been, and how fortunate Captain Badger had told her the truth! Then, again, that other idea. If he meant to marry money, he was just as sordid as other men, though evidently it was not her money he wanted. Whose could it be? Could it be that she had guessed rightly, that the other day when she had mentioned Mrs Leslie, his face had

betrayed a hidden feeling? If so, he was taking a mean advantage of Sir Duncan's kindness; but if she were to speak of him to Miss Forbes—if she were to hint that he was money-hunting—she was sure his chances, even if he were ever to have any, would be over in that quarter. Decidedly she felt put out, and it was Captain Badger's doing.

While people speculated about her with that indifference to her recent bereavement which springs from no unkindness, but from a natural knowledge of the buoyancy of youth, Muriel moved among them in utter unconsciousness of their thoughts. That any one should have dreamed, much less have spoken, of her marrying again, would have seemed to her—had she known of it—an unpardonable insult. Not that she said to herself that she never would marry again—she had simply never contemplated such a possibility as that she

should be loved; and in her thoughts of the future she pictured herself growing accustomed to a lonely life, and bearing it patiently, while the people about her estate should learn to lean on her for counsel, and should profit by her advice and assistance. She had completely forgotten that note of Ronald's which she and her father had read and answered together just before her marriage, and in which she had found an unintentional admission of his affection,—had forgotten it as we do forget incidents which slip away into some hidden corner of our memories, only to leap out and confront us at some unexpected moment.

At first, when she saw Ronald she had not been able entirely to banish the painful associations suggested by the sight of one who had come home out of the war that had cost her husband his life. But one day she fancied that he had detected her thought, and had avoided her in consequence; and

regretting that she should have seemed unkind to him, she endeavoured to banish the idea that had hurt him, and was soon able to welcome him without reserve.

He did not trespass on the hospitality offered him. Sir Duncan complained once or twice that his visits were as rare as though he were a slight acquaintance, but did not press the matter, remembering better than his daughter the tenor of that old note, and guessing that Ronald did not wish to run into too great temptation. At the same time, he himself longed for his society: his fresh, vigorous spirit warmed and cheered his own greyer days, especially now when Muriel's bereavement closed the doors of Inverallan to guests; and at last he suggested to Ronald, that if he wanted books and a smoke, and was not inclined for ladies' society, he might come to the library and smoking-room and see him, without making a formal call.

Ronald speedily took advantage of this proposal, and would often drop in to discuss the last volume he had taken out, or tell Sir Duncan of his day's sport, without his presence being known to either Miss Forbes or Mrs Leslie. The latter found him there once or twice when she came to her father for advice, or passed through to her own writing-room in the turret; but she only spoke a word or two, and proceeded to her occupations, accepting the tacit understanding that he came to see Sir Duncan.

It was during one of these visits that Miss Hardwicke, in compliance with his repeated request, took Captain Badger to call at Inverallan. She did not do so altogether willingly; for with a sort of liking for the Captain, she mingled a vague distrust of his taste and manners, which made her hesitate to take him to a house where she always felt herself more or less, as she said, on her good behaviour.

Captain Badger knew how to be polite as well as amusing, in a superficial way, and was able to ingratiate himself with Laura to a certain extent by suiting himself to the hoydenish side of her character ; but she possessed a good deal of native shrewdness, and was not blind to some of his deficiencies, though neither he nor she would have understood that his very presence was an offence to the family at Inverallan.

Muriel recognised him at a glance, and with some annoyance ; but she concluded that he must be staying at Broomieknowe, and that Miss Hardwicke had brought him, as she was in the habit of bringing her guests to see the picture-gallery and the park.

“ Let Sir Duncan know,” she said to the servant, as he announced the visitors.

The man paused a moment—“ Mr Bennett is with Sir Duncan, ma’am.”

“ Oh, tell him Miss Hardwicke and Captain Badger are here.”

Captain Badger had very quick ears, and was puzzled at the sentence he was pretty sure that he had heard correctly. Surely Bennett would not be in the house without seeing Mrs Leslie, yet she did not seem to know he was there. Presently Sir Duncan and Ronald entered ; and to his surprise, the latter said good morning to the ladies, so that evidently they had not met before. In a very short time Miss Hardwicke rose to go. She had been ill at ease, the conversation had flagged unaccountably, and she now proposed that she should walk down the avenue and wood, and that her pony-carriage should meet them at the farthest gate. It was the usual programme on these occasions, for the wood-walk was laid out with great taste, and the views from it were among the sights of the neighbourhood.

“Will you not see the picture-gallery first?” said Muriel.

“Oh, I don’t know that Captain Badger cares for pictures,” said Laura, glancing at him.

“Pictures! Oh, delighted! I enjoy seeing pictures,” said Badger, who did not know a Hobbema from a Rubens.

“Indeed! then, with Mrs Leslie’s leave, we will look in there on our way to the park, so we can say good-bye now,” answered Laura.

The gallery at Inverallan was another of the recognised sights, and for this reason a special access had been provided, in order that visitors might see it without disturbing the family. It had long since come to be understood that Miss Hardwicke should take her friends there unaccompanied, for as she once naively remarked to Muriel, “It’s far jollier to go without the owners, because then one needn’t look at more than one wants to see.” Still, Miss Forbes, or

Mrs Leslie, had on various occasions shown the way to the gallery, but Laura knew well that they would not do so to-day.

“Very well,” was all Muriel said in reply to her last remark ; and then she rang the bell, and desired the servant to unlock the outer door of the gallery, and wished her visitors good morning.

“What style of painting do you prefer?” said Laura to her companion, as they passed through the folding-doors. “There is a fine collection of portraits, pictures of the Dutch landscape-school, etchings, and modern art.”

“You seem to know all about it, at any rate,” replied Captain Badger.

“Considering that almost all our visitors want to come here, that is not to be wondered at.”

“And does Mrs Leslie never condescend to accompany you?”

Laura glanced quickly at him. Was it in

order to see more of Mrs Leslie that he wished to walk through the gallery? She answered him shrewdly—

“Not usually. I like to take my guests myself. She sometimes comes when I have very charming people with me.”

“I understand. So these are the portraits, are they?”

“Yes, this is a Gainsborough, and this a Raeburn. Do you admire them?”

“This is a tremendous fellow in the Highland dress—1743, I see,—a rank Jacobite, I daresay.”

“Oh yes; after giving up all his plate to the Prince, and seeing his eldest son killed, he was beheaded himself.”

“All for an idea. I would have sworn allegiance to the new king, and kept my money and my life.”

“I daresay you would have been wiser than he. Shall we go on, or do you want to see the etchings?”

"I think not—thanks; they're not much in my line. Does Bennett come over here much? He had been with Sir Duncan this morning."

"I believe he sits with him a good deal. I have twice known that he was there, though I did not see him."

"Curious way to make up to the heiress, isn't it?"

"You seem quite certain that he means to make up to that heiress?" asked Laura, with a hardly perceptible emphasis on *that*.

"I don't see any reason to doubt it, judging from the way he spoke of her on board ship. He seemed to know her uncommonly well, and meant to make the most of it. He has forgotten the sergeant's daughter, poor thing, by this time! I can't say I admire his choice. Mrs Leslie's pretty enough, but she's awfully stiff; one can't talk with a woman like that. I prefer more life and greater ease."

Miss Hardwicke apparently did not care for the implied compliment, for she began to point out the sharp crags of the Cobbler and the cleft crown of Ben Lomond, visible from the glass doors by which they were now passing out from the gallery into the garden.

Captain Badger cared as little for scenery as he did for pictures, but he was not averse to a walk in fine grounds with a pretty woman beside him, and he did his best to improve the occasion. Miss Hardwicke, however, was less gay than usual, and he found it uphill work, and wondered if there were any chance at all for him with this wayward and seemingly capricious girl.

The truth was, that a variety of contending feelings were troubling her composure, and rendering her inattentive and unready when the usual challenges fell upon her ear. She had admired Mrs Leslie with girlish enthusiasm, but Muriel's sedate and

quiet manner, and inability to appreciate the tasteless chaff which Laura miscalled "fun," had somewhat damped the feeling, or at least had kept it in abeyance. Still, she always longed to win her approval, and was glad when Muriel greeted her kindly and spoke to her with her own winning smile. To-day the smile had been wanting, and Laura had not been surprised, for, for the first time in her life, she had felt herself pert and her companion vulgar. Every word he uttered in that harsh yet insinuating voice had annoyed her. His compliments were impertinent, his phrases slangy, his appearance under-bred; and in the stately drawing-room of Inverallan, with Muriel's calm face and well-trained voice in sharp contrast to him, Laura had been angry with herself for having brought him. It was not only Muriel's criticism that she deprecated: Ronald Bennett had been there, had seen, had heard, must think her uncon-

scious of Captain Badger's peculiarities; and moreover, she felt keenly that he, the son of a country minister, looked every inch a gentleman, and was perfectly insensible to the attractions of her good looks, her money, and her kind feeling towards himself.

"You're driving as ladies drive, Miss Hardwicke,—do you know what a pace you're going?" asked Badger uneasily, as the little carriage swung round a corner.

"I suppose I am going rather fast," said Laura, rousing herself and taking a pull at the ponies' heads.

"Doesn't Bennett live on this road somewhere? I ought to call there some day."

"I can put you down here if you like. The manse is close at hand," she replied, slackening their speed.

"Oh, won't you come? you know them, don't you?"

“Of course I do ; but I would rather not call to-day,” answered Laura.

“Oh, then, I’ll defer the pleasure ; I should not like to shorten this drive,” said Captain Badger ; and Laura whipped up her ponies again, and drove rapidly home.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## TWO HEIRESSES.

AFTER her unsuccessful visit to Inverallan, Laura Hardwicke complained to her brother, as they sat at dinner, that Badger had bored her, and that no one at Inverallan had liked him.

“Why on earth do you let him hang about you?” said Ernest Hardwicke. “I don’t like him myself.”

“Yet you are civil to him when he comes, and so am I, and so he goes on coming. I wonder why we all do that sort of thing. By the by, Ernest, he says Mr Bennett wants to marry Mrs Leslie.”

“The deuce he does ! So much the worse for him, I should say.”

“I think Captain Badger would do it himself if he could.”

“He ! Good heavens, Laura ! if I thought he had the cheek to dream of such a thing, I’d—I’d——”

“O Ernest, Ernest, how you fire up about her ! What is it, I wonder, that makes her rule people so—can you tell me ?”

“No ; yes—it’s difficult to express. She makes a man feel and believe somehow that she is a perfectly pure-hearted womanly woman ; no one ever saw a glance from her eyes or heard a word from her lips that he would be sorry for—that’s the meaning of it, I think.”

Laura looked grave. As she thought over various flirtations, of an innocent enough sort, with which she had amused herself, she doubted if her brother could have said

as much of her. He had rebuked her without intending it.

“I’ve asked Bennett to come and stay here for a couple of days when the Grays come,” continued he. “I’d like them to meet him, and it’s a bore for him always going home at night. Miss Gray would be a good match for him, too—don’t you think so?”

“Very,” said Laura, shortly. She began to feel piqued; even Ernest talked to her as if she could have no interest in Ronald Bennett, though every one about her praised and admired him. She wished he had not been coming to stay; but as he was to come, she resolved that in her own house neither Miss Gray nor any one else should eclipse her.

The parties at Broomieknowe were very pleasant of their kind. There was a perpetual stir, a searching for amusement, a desire for fun, unknown in the quieter

entertainments at Inverallan ; but the fun, such as it was, pleased the guests, for as they were mostly young, they enjoyed the alternations of dancing, billiards, round games, and charades, which followed each other in rapid succession. In all these Laura shone. She was invariably well dressed, and the little excitement of the games and of her position as hostess, heightened her colour and added sparkle to her eyes, so that she looked undeniably handsome.

Ronald began to think that she was prettier than he had imagined, and was not sorry to find an opportunity of obliging her. A charade had been arranged, but at the last moment one of the actors who was not staying in the house sent an excuse, and Laura found it difficult to replace him.

“If your sister would like it, I think I could take the part,” said Ronald to Hardwicke.

"She'll be delighted," said Ernest, and was dismayed to find that Laura was less pleased than he had anticipated.

"Suppose he has never acted—he might break down," said she; "but I'll ask him. I hear you have volunteered to help us, Mr Bennett; it is very good of you. Is this to be your *début*, may I ask?"

"Not quite; I belonged to two theatrical clubs in India," said Ronald, smiling. "I am used to acting, Miss Hardwicke."

"And you never told me! Oh, Mr Bennett, how unkind of you! but it's just like you—you always keep yourself in the background," said Laura, colouring.

"That is best for me," he said, gently, "and better than putting one's self in the foreground, isn't it?"

"Yes, among strangers; but here—you might have told Ernest—you don't do yourself justice among your friends."

Ronald was better pleased with Laura's

manner at this moment than he had ever been ; he felt that she understood and sympathised with his desire to avoid anything like forwardness or pretension, and they went to join the others in the green-room with less of formality and a nearer approach to friendship between them than heretofore.

The charade was a success, and in the dance that followed Laura was more than once Bennett's partner, to the great annoyance of Captain Badger, who had almost extorted an invitation for that evening. In the last turn of a valse Laura's dress caught on a flower-stand, and a long rent was apparent. Ronald stooped to gather up the torn plaiting, and as he did so Badger approached.

" You want pins, Miss Hardwicke ; allow me to offer you a pin-cushion—I always carry one at a hop. Where's yours, Bennett?"

" Mine ? I haven't got one, I'm not much at dances."

“You’ve thrown it away, I suppose. He used to have one, Miss Hardwicke—a sort of needle and thread and pin thing; I’ve seen him sew on a button in his tent. Fair fingers made it for him, but they’re forgotten now.”

“Indeed they are not; I never forget any one who has been kind to me, or the reverse,” said Bennett; and giving Laura his arm, he led her away to have her dress mended.

“Were the fingers very fair that made the needle-book?” she asked.

“They were very useful—not as fair as the face of their owner,” replied Ronald, recalling pretty Ellen Smith at Hubblepore; and this answer identified the giver of the needle-book in Laura’s mind with the sergeant’s daughter of whom Badger had previously spoken to her.

“And you have thrown away the needle-book—how unkind!”

“I did not say I had, Miss Hardwicke.

It is safe along with other relics of the campaign. I should be very sorry to lose it."

"Oh, is it? Then you are more constant than Captain Badger supposed," said Laura.

Unaware as he was of Badger's gossip, he thought she was merely jesting, and replied in the same strain.

"I am of a most constant disposition, Miss Hardwicke—some people even say I am obstinate, but that is unjust."

"I daresay you enjoyed that Indian life sometimes," she continued, longing to ask more direct questions.

"Indeed I did. People were wonderfully good to me, and it was in many ways extremely pleasant."

"And is the maker of the needle-book there still?"

"No; I am glad to say she is at home. She has spent too long a time in India," replied Ronald, and, foolish fellow, did not add that she was now the wife of a cavalry

riding-master, whose regiment had reached England a few months ago.

Laura of course drew her own conclusions from the conversation, and they by-and-by bore fruit in the shape of an invitation to Miss Forbes to come over and see her new orchid in blossom—for Miss Forbes and Laura were great gardeners, and used to have frequent interviews during the summer and autumn on that account.

Miss Forbes came, the rest of the Broomie-knowe guests having by this time departed; and it was while the two lingered in the conservatories that Laura repeated to her Captain Badger's assertions and her own conversation with Ronald.

“Dear, dear, how vexed my brother will be! this is so different from what he thought!” said incautious Miss Forbes. “I never should have fancied this of Ronald. Do you think Captain Badger was sure about it?”

“He said Mr Bennett had applied for leave to marry this girl, and threw her over afterwards ; and he did not say it as if he were uncertain of it.”

“He did not throw her over on account of his commission, surely ?”

“That’s what I don’t know ; but then Mr Bennett himself spoke of her the other night as if he remembered her still, and said he was glad she had come home.”

“Perhaps he’s engaged to her now.”

“But, Miss Forbes, Captain Badger declares that he says he must marry money, and is searching for an heiress,” said Laura, with a slightly heightened colour, but looking her companion straight in the face.

“Oh !” ejaculated Miss Forbes, and paused. Was there anything between him and this heiress ? she wondered ; if so, her own eyes must have been completely at fault. “Well,” she continued, tentatively, “I should say that whoever he marries will

be very happy, as far as I know him or can judge of his character; and my brother thinks very highly of him—very highly indeed. Of course he has no position; but then that does not matter,” she added abruptly, remembering that Laura’s father had been a workman in some great dye-works, and had made his fortune through a happy accidental discovery.

“It does not always matter,” corrected Laura, shrewdly; “but I think the coming heiress will need to know about this needle-book.”

“Oh, my dear, the coming heiress must not be too inquisitive. There would be very few marriages if people always expected to win a first love,” answered Miss Forbes, sagely; but Laura was too young to endorse her opinion.

“It would not suit me to be jealous of needle-books or other relics, Miss Forbes; but here we are gossiping over Mr Bennett and

forgetting the flowers. I have such a lovely lily to show you in this other house; come and see it, and then we will go in to tea."

Miss Forbes went home rather pleased than otherwise at the gossip she had heard. Personally, she liked Ronald. The charm of manner which in his mother had attracted Lady Forbes, was repeated in him, and the somewhat old-fashioned courtesy he displayed towards her pleased her taste and her vanity. But, in spite of her liking, she could not reconcile herself to the idea that he might at some future time be a suitor for Muriel's hand. It was true that he had never said or done anything to give rise to the idea—anything at least that could be pronounced on with certainty. Nevertheless, Miss Forbes felt sure that he cherished a great liking for her niece; and one can never tell, thought she, how soon that sort of liking may grow into love. Of course she told Sir Duncan what she

had heard ; and as on each occasion of its repetition the tale gained in emphasis, a very good case was now made out against Ronald. As usual, however, Miss Forbes found that her brother took it in an unexpected way.

“It is quite natural, Alicia. I cannot see why you should talk in that judicial fashion because we hear that the lad has been in love with a pretty girl. It would have been odd if he had escaped altogether heart-whole.”

“But that he should have thrown her over,” began Miss Forbes.

“Yes,” said Sir Duncan, thoughtfully ; “if that is true, he has behaved badly ; but I cannot believe it of him.”

“But surely Captain Badger ought to know—an officer in the same regiment.”

“He might know ; but whether he is accurate, and whether he says what he means, are different matters.”

"But he can have no motive for speaking ill of Ronald."

"That is true, and that is the worst point. Still, I should not take an assertion made by Captain Badger *au pied de la lettre*."

"No, I daresay not. He is very vulgar. I cannot think how Laura Hardwicke can tolerate him as she does; but one can't help remembering an incident like this, no matter who it is that tells it."

"Quite true, Alicia. That's how reputations are ruined. One doesn't believe what one hears, and yet one can't forget it," said Sir Duncan, gravely. "Perhaps I may be able to find out the truth of this story from Ronald some of these days."

Ronald and Muriel met, about this time, more frequently than heretofore. The former had determined to resume his studies with a view to passing into the Staff College, and qualifying for Staff appointments. He

knew that in all probability his regiment would soon come home; and he foresaw that, after the excitement of a campaign, garrison duty would be intolerably dull and unsatisfying. Moreover, if he could get a good appointment, he would be, socially at least, one step nearer to Muriel. Urged by these motives, he worked hard, and being in consequence much at home, had frequent opportunities of seeing her when she came to visit his mother and compare notes with her on parish matters.

There was great excitement just then in the village on the subject of certain old cottages which Sir Duncan had decided to pull down, and replace by more modern buildings arranged in flats. His resolve had given great offence to many of the cottagers, and Muriel was using all her influence to allay the storm. The steep-roofed, tumble-down one-storeyed cottages doomed to destruction were unsightly as

well as uncomfortable; but the dwellers in them were convinced that nothing new could be as suitable, and spoke with derision of sanitary improvements.

“Hoot awa’ wi’ yer nonsense aboot sawnitaries!” said a red-faced virago, as she stood with arms akimbo at her door, where the long drops from the thatch fell past her into the perennial puddle in which her feet were firmly planted. “Hoot awa’! there were five o’ us born in ae room up the street yonner, an’ I hae had nine in my but-an’-ben, and whaur’ll ye show me stooter bairns? The laird can keep his breath to cool his ain parritch, and he can gar the wind blaw his ain hoose tap-salteeie, but he’ll no meddle wi’ mine!”

“But they say there’s a man, a sawnitary inspector they ca’ him, comin’ roon’ to see a’s richt,” said Mrs M’Rorie, deprecatingly.

“If ony inspector, whether he’s a sawni-

tary or no, keeks into *my* hoose, he'll gang oot quicker nor he cam' in. Presairve me ! can a body no' paste up a bit wundy wi'oot the leave o' an inspector ? Hoot, the laird maun be doited an' the inspector daft !" and the speaker flung into her cottage, slamming the door as a protest against the admission of fresh air.

After a long talk with one of the grumblers, Muriel came to the manse and stayed to luncheon. Ronald, unaware of her presence, felt a quick thrill of pleasure as he entered the dining-room and saw her sitting there. She had taken off her bonnet and cloak, and looked, without her widow's cap, almost like the girl of old days who used to call the manse her second home.

"Come and give a casting vote, Ronald," said she, rising and taking her place at the table ; "you are always ready to help me. I have been thinking what I can do to reconcile the people to the new houses, and

I propose to ask Jamie Paterson to move into one of them."

"It would never do," said Mrs Bennett. "I doubt if Jamie would go, as his house is not one that must be altered yet; and if the new flats are to be kept decent, he's not the man to put into them."

"His house must come down some day, you see, and I think you mistake Jamie. He has made a great effort of late, and to assume that he would keep a new room respectable would, I think, help him on."

"I agree with you," said Ronald. "Suppose you were to confide your difficulties to him and ask him to help you, he would probably do it."

"But would he get over the habits of years, and keep the new rooms clean?" persisted Mrs Bennett.

"I don't know, mother; but if he tried, it would be something, and if anything can move him, it is your influence, Mrs Leslie."

“Ah, you think too much of what I can do!”

“And you always underrate your own power,” said Ronald, gently.

“No, no; you don’t know how all this dissatisfaction in the place has hurt me,” said Muriel, tears springing to her eyes. “I thought people did value my dear father; yet in spite of all he has done, and although he explained his reasons for the change, every one is against him.”

“That is human nature, I fear, my bairn,” said Mrs Bennett.

“Then it is very discouraging.”

“Of course it is; but still, though there may be a passing blaze of anger, there’s a deal of warm feeling below it; and as to Jamie, I am not speaking carelessly in saying you are responsible for the improvement in him,” remarked Ronald.

“That is some comfort, then,” said Muriel, “though I have done little enough for him.”

“You have been a kind of good angel to him, Mrs Leslie, as you are to many,” continued Ronald, earnestly.

“Am I?” said Muriel, rather sadly : she was thinking of happier days, and did not even notice the tone of Ronald’s voice ; and he observed her indifference and the absent look in her eyes, and turned the conversation to lighter matters.

“I shall go and see Jamie now,” said she, as she rose to leave, “and I shall let you know how I fare.”

“Pray do. I shall be disappointed if you are not pleased with the result of your visit.”

“Come up to-morrow and hear about it,” said Muriel, looking up as though she were just realising that this quiet friend who was always ready to listen, and advise, and sympathise with her, might need to receive something, some little kindness from her.

“With pleasure,” said he. “Indeed I have not been at the Hall for more than a week.”

“Is it so long? Papa must have missed you; but I have seen you here, so I did not find out your absence.”

“How kindly she spoke!” thought Ronald, as he closed the garden gate behind her, and watched her slight figure moving towards Jamie’s cottage — “how kindly, how frankly! and yet I am nothing to her that any one else could not be as well. I must go away soon, or I shall begin to think too much of her again; yet, as long as she likes to talk to me, I cannot wish to leave.”

Arrived at the shoemaker’s, Muriel sat down on a straight-backed chair produced for her from some remote dark corner, and plunged into her subject. She spoke of the ruinous condition of the present dwellings, the advantages of the new, and her regret at the feeling evoked by the change.

Jamie listened quietly, only shaking his head over the last part of the tale.

“There’s nae doot that Scotch folk are sweir to mak’ changes,” said he, when she had ended.

“So I see, Jamie; and now I have come to you for advice.”

“To *me*!” said the old man, shoving his spectacles up on to his forehead and gazing at her. “Ye’re no makin’ fun o’ me, Mrs Leslie!”

“Jamie! you surely do not think I would do such a thing,” said Muriel, seriously.

“Weel, weel, it wadna be like ye; but losh! for you to be speirin’ at *me* for advice——” Jamie did not end this sentence, but bent over his work again with an odd smile on his face.

“I want to know what you would advise me to do to make the people take more kindly to the new flats. It would be quite wrong to leave the old houses standing. They’d have been pulled down years ago if the tenants had not begged that they might remain as they were.”

“H-m—that’s nae sae easy answered,” said Jamie, plying his awl for a minute or two in silence. “Could ye no’ get ane or twa decent folk, say Mrs M’Rorie there, frae the neist house, to tak’ the rooms? and likely they’d be satisfied wi’ them, and the neebors wad hear o’t.”

“Just what I thought of, Jamie; but I did not quite know whom to speak to. You think Mrs M’Rorie would do it?”

“Ou ay, I daursay she wad. She’s a sensible woman; ye can mak’ her hear reason whiles. And there’s anither thing—gin ye could hae a crack wi’ yane or twa o’ them, and tell them a’ aboot it, jist as ye hae dune wi’ me, the neebors wad sune hear o’t. Folks is no sae camsteerie gin ye stroke them the richt way o’ the ’oo’.”

“Exactly, Jamie. If, as you say, somebody would talk a bit about it all to them, and if one or two of the right sort would take the rooms, everything would go straight.”

“Ay.”

“Jamie, will you do it for me?”

Once more the shoemaker gazed at his visitor with a bewildered face, then he broke into a laugh.

“I’ve baited a trap for mysel’, I’m thinkin’,” said he. “Na, na, Mrs Leslie, I couldna gang into a bran-new hoose like yon. Ye maun get some o’ the gudewives, no’ a ne’er-do-weel like me.”

“You’re not to call yourself that, Jamie, for it is not true. Now you know if I talk to some of the gudewives, the others will think I should have gone to them, and I cannot go to the whole of them while they are so angry with my father; but if you were to maké a beginning, you would manage far better than I,—and I should be so grateful to you. I can’t bear to hear the people say they would rather leave the dear old village than take the new rooms.”

“Ay, ay, ye’ve been unco fashed about it, I see that,” said Jamie, looking at her face. “Weel, it’s a terrible thing to ask an old man like me to flit, and I couldna jist promise that I’ll dae it; but if you’ll let me think it ower a wee while, I’ll let you hear.”

“Thank you, Jamie: don’t hurry yourself; I will do nothing till I hear from you,” said Muriel, shaking hands.

“Hae ye spoken to Mr Ronald?” he asked.

“Yes, I was there to-day.”

“And what did he say?”

“Just what you said, Jamie, and thought you would be sure to help me,” she replied, smiling.

“Ay—did he? He’s a fine lad yon, Mrs Leslie—a fine lad, wi’ a leal heart o’ his ain.”

“Yes indeed,” said she, and went away, while Jamie sat thinking deeply over his work.

Towards evening he laid aside his leather apron, took off his spectacles, and put on his coat, a process equivalent to assuming full dress. He then went up to the manse, and asked to see Ronald.

“Miss Muriel” (he often called her so still) “was wi’ me the day. Ye heard a’ she said about thae flats?” he began.

“Yes,” said Ronald; “she is very much put out about them.”

“H-m—d’ye think it wad be ony kind o’ satisfaction till her if I flitted? I wadna dae’t for jist a lassie’s fancy, ye ken.”

“I’m quite sure it would be doing her a real kindness if you can persuade any of the people not to oppose Sir Duncan. It grieves her greatly.”

“Then I’ll flit! My certie, the warld maun be tapsalteerie when auld Jamie dis sae mickle to pleasure a woman! But she’s no’ like the lave—she’s as gude as she’s bonny,” said Jamie, looking at Ronald with

much the same expression in his eyes as they had shown when he spoke to Muriel of the "fine lad."

"She is that," replied Ronald; and after a few more words, the shoemaker went his way. He applied next morning, with much importance, for rooms in the new flats; and whether his judicious talk exercised its effect, or the merits of the building were indisputable, or the dislike to them died out as such sudden stormy prejudices are apt to do, Muriel soon had the delight of knowing that no one left the village of Tillybodle on account of the much-abused improvements, and moreover, that Jamie was taking pride in the condition of his bright new rooms.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## BADGER'S GOSSIP.

EARLY in the spring Ronald went to Edinburgh, having to his great satisfaction been attached to the staff of the general commanding there, in order that his qualifications for work might be put to the test, with a view to his admission to the Staff College. After his quiet existence at Tillybogle, the change diverted and pleased him, and he found himself very soon in the midst of such enjoyments as the town at that season could offer. He recovered old friends and made new ones, and found himself popular. Few of the officers of the Affghanistan army had as yet made their

way to Edinburgh, and people were therefore very kindly disposed towards those who did appear, and especially towards one whose story was almost a romance.

By-and-by it occurred to Ronald that as the —th was at Piershill he might go and see Mrs Jenkins, once pretty Ellen Smith. He went accordingly, and was shocked and startled at the change that eighteen months had made in her. The colour had faded in the cheeks that once were round and rosy, though it flickered there a moment when Ronald entered; her plump figure was gone, and in her eyes—once so innocent and trusting—there was a hunted expression that went to his heart. Mr Jenkins was in the room when he arrived, but was forced to leave on account of some duty, and his absence was an evident relief. It needed but a kindly question to open the flood-gates of her trouble, and in a few minutes she had told Ronald that on the

following day she was coming up to Edinburgh to see a lawyer with a view to obtaining a divorce. She must leave again by the four o'clock train for Portobello, where her husband believed she was to spend the afternoon with a friend.

"She can't help me though—I don't like her—and I haven't a real friend in the world," she said, "now that father is dead; and I'd rather kill myself than go on with the life I'm leading."

Ronald could not do less after such an interview than promise any help that it might be in his power to give; and before he came away he agreed to be in waiting at the four o'clock train on the following day, so as to hear what success had attended her. There was no need to question her when he met her at the station; her eyes were red with weeping, and even yet the tears were scarcely checked.

"There's no escape for me," she said,

with quivering lips ; “ the law’s always against a woman, especially if she’s poor. I can’t tell you about it now, but I wrote down some of what he said : there it is—take it away with you and read it.”

“ I will, and I will send it back.”

“ Oh, mercy on us, don’t do that ! ” cried Ellen, her eyes wide and frightened. “ I couldn’t get a letter that Jenkins wouldn’t see, and he’d be mad if he thought I’d heard from you or shown you that paper. Keep it for me ; and oh, Mr Bennett, if ever I write to you for it, or ask you to help me, will you do it ? You’re always kind and true,—I could get on better if I thought there was some one would give me a helping hand.”

“ My dear girl, you may depend upon my doing anything I can for you. You won’t forget my address ; write to me at any time, and I, and my mother too, will do our best for you.”

“Oh, thank you ! Oh, if men were all like you ! I’ll not trouble you if I can manage without. I’ve my plans, and perhaps I’ll write to you about them, but it’s a comfort just to know there’s some one,—yes, I’ll get in, please. Good-bye.”

They were standing by the railway carriage, and it was a guard who cut short Ellen’s parting words, smiling covertly as he did so, for her agitation had been visible, and her imploring gaze into Ronald’s face had been remarked by more than one passer-by. He was not unconscious of the fact ; but while he stood so as to screen her as much as possible from observation, he had not the heart to check her rapid utterance and expressive gestures, for he saw that she could with difficulty control herself. Her scrap of paper he put into his waistcoat-pocket, to be read in the house, and when the train moved off he went indoors for that purpose. He did not notice that the

north train was waiting at a platform a little farther up the station, and that among the passengers going by it was Captain Badger.

Captain Badger rarely forgot a face, and invariably remembered a pretty woman. He recognised Ellen the moment he saw her, and, as he thought, took in the whole situation at a glance.

“Oho!” said he to himself, “that’s the little game, is it? This is our pattern man, who finds the heiresses hard to win, I suppose. By Jove, how that girl’s gone off! Jenkins is a brute, I know, and here’s the confidant come to the rescue,—little notes, agonised parting, and all the rest of it. It’s quite a novel; but I wonder what the third volume will be! Uncommonly lucky I saw them.”

It was curious how often luck of that sort attended Captain Badger, and how very little came of it. Once in his life he

really had discovered a scandal; but the discovery, as he used it, nearly procured him a horsewhipping. On other occasions without number, when, in his own phrase, he had "smelt a rat," though he had followed up the scent with his usual keenness, it would have been difficult to say that he or any one else had benefited by the pursuit. Still, as his appetite for such amusements had increased rather than diminished, it must be supposed that he extracted some satisfaction from its gratification. He was not one to keep his knowledge to himself, unless, indeed, it was to serve some end; but in this instance it suited him particularly well to let the facts be known at once.

He fancied that he had made some way with Miss Hardwicke since Bennett left; certainly she had been more like her old self, as he had known her years ago, more amusing, and altogether "in better form." He hardly believed that he would ever

marry her ; but whether he did so or not, it suited him to be on good terms with her, and to be considered at least a possible aspirant. If he could persuade her of Bennett's delinquencies, the jealousy which he could see was strongly developed in her character would be in arms, and would destroy the romantic liking which she had evidently conceived for him, and a point would thus be made in his, Badger's, favour.

The luck was with him again when, a couple of days after his return, he found Sir Duncan Forbes and Ernest Hardwicke together in the county club at Stirling.

"Bennett has left home already, hasn't he ?" said Badger, after a remark or two on indifferent topics.

"Yes, his appointment dates from this week, but he went in a few days sooner in order to visit some old friends."

"Ha, ha ! Old friends, did he say ? So

they are, very old friends indeed. I saw one of them with him at the station."

"What do you mean?" asked Hardwicke.

"Oh, a girl he was fond of in his sergeant days. She was tremendously in love with him; and I think, you know, he ought to have married her, but he didn't. I suppose they settled it somehow."

"And is she living in Edinburgh?" inquired Sir Duncan.

"Not that I know of. She married the riding-master of the —th, who is a ruffian; and Bennett, when I saw him, was playing the comforter. There was quite a little scene at the station."

"Was there? When is your trap ordered, Sir Duncan?" said Hardwicke, indifferently.

"It should be here presently. Let me drive you as far as the branch road."

"Thanks. My dogcart can follow. Good morning, Badger."

“They’re hit, both of them,” said Badger to himself, as he selected the easiest arm-chair and took up a paper. “Odd what a fuss they make about that fellow. What the deuce they see in him, I can’t make out. I’ll call on Laura on Wednesday. Let her have to-morrow to think it over. She’ll be sure to hear it to-night.”

“What do you think of that story, Sir Duncan?” said Hardwicke, when the two had driven in silence for a short distance.

“I think it’s a lie,” answered Sir Duncan, with quiet emphasis; “and if I could prove it, upon my word, though I’m an old man, I’d be tempted to lay my stick about that fellow’s ears.”

Sir Duncan was studiously moderate in his language, but the tone of that word “fellow” was more cutting than if he had heaped upon Badger common expletives.

“You have very great belief in Bennett,”

said his companion, half curiously, half sympathisingly.

"I have known him from a child ; and child, boy, and man, he has been a gentleman—by which I mean a good deal. He has committed his share of follies : running away from home was one, and enlisting was another."

"You can hardly say that now ?"

"No, perhaps not—though it seemed a folly at the time. He was a lad opinionated to a degree, touchy and over-sensitive; but I never knew him do or say a shabby thing, and I never heard him say a light word of a woman. Putting my knowledge against Captain Badger's, I say again, that story, as he told it, is a lie."

"Quite my own feeling, Sir Duncan. Bennett's a good fellow—I think you know why. He has been influenced by good women,—his mother, and another—one

whom we both know, Sir Duncan," said Hardwicke, looking straight before him and speaking in jerks, as his wont was when much in earnest. "I didn't know her soon enough. I'd had my follies early : sown my wild oats, a good crop—reaped 'em too. But since I did know her, I can say, Sir Duncan, that I'm not ashamed of my life. I'm dull, but I've clean hands, Sir Duncan—clean hands. I couldn't look her in the face if I hadn't."

Sir Duncan turned and surveyed the speaker with his kindly grey eyes. "I had no idea of this, Hardwicke."

"No, never said so,—no use, I knew that. What was the good of plaguing her? Hoped to be friends with her; hoped she'd do my sister some good; wished I could do anything worth doing, and tell her some day it was owing to her—that was all."

"My dear boy, you are a right good fellow! I'm very glad you've told me this,

and I shan't forget it. Here we are at the cross-roads—good-bye.”

“Good - bye, Sir Duncan,” said Hardwicke, turning now and facing him. Was it because his eyes were moist that he had not done so sooner?

“Good-bye again, my dear fellow; God bless you!” said old Sir Duncan, grasping his hand; and he, too, did not seem to see quite clearly for an instant as he drove off.

He was somewhat silent that night at dinner, and Muriel fancied he was tired; but yet he spoke with all his usual energy when, suddenly rousing himself, he called her to his side.

“Muriel,” said he, “I drove Hardwicke as far as the cross-roads to-day. We had some talk, and I was extremely pleased with him. He is a gallant-hearted fellow. I wish, if you can show any kindness to his sister, you would do so.”

“Very well, papa; but I do not see her

often. I don't think she cares for a quiet house like this."

"She cares for her brother."

"Yes; they are devoted to each other."

"Then you can reach her through him. Take my word for it, he deserves her affection, and she will be sensitive to praise for his sake. She is a little flighty, I fancy. If you can influence her, try and do so. I should be well pleased if you succeed."

"I will do my best, papa. Mr Hardwicke seems very pleasant, though his manner is so odd. He is always anxious, too, about his place and his people."

"Have him here, dear, oftener, if he likes to come. I daresay his sister doesn't sympathise much with him in these matters. I shall be glad to see more of him."

Muriel wondered a little what could have made so great an impression on her father, but she asked no questions, and in a day or two invited her neighbours over, and

did her best to carry out Sir Duncan's injunctions.

Laura, always impressionable, was delighted with her visit. Mrs Leslie was so kind, so companionable, so much less critical than she had thought her; and Ernest was so thoroughly happy, that altogether she greatly enjoyed herself. There had been little intercourse between the two houses during the anxious months of the Affghan campaign. Laura's high spirits were unendurable to Muriel in her long suspense, and the grave faces at Inverallan damped the gaiety which at Broomieknowe was considered necessary to existence. The ladies, therefore, had seldom met, but now it seemed as though something like intimacy might grow up between them; and Hardwicke encouraged it by every means in his power. Thus it happened that when Captain Badger again presented himself at Broomieknowe, he met with a less favour-

able reception than he had anticipated,— Laura's warm nature yielding itself completely to the better influence ascendant for the moment. Her replies to a leading question or two showed her visitor that her brother had not enlightened her respecting Bennett's parting with Mrs Jenkins, and the Captain proceeded to tell his tale so far as it was possible for him to do so. The impression he left upon her mind was, that there was a serious flirtation between Bennett and a girl, now married, who had given him the needle-book of which she had already heard, and that they were even seen together in public in Edinburgh. Hitherto Badger's gossip had done Ronald no harm ; but now at last the poisoned arrow was to wound him, for Laura, indignant and disgusted, took the first opportunity of repeating all that she had heard to Mrs Leslie.

Muriel listened gravely, and wondered if her father were aware of the tale ; but her

unasked question was answered, for Laura concluded by saying, "I spoke to Ernest about it last night, and he said he and Sir Duncan had heard it, and Sir Duncan didn't believe it."

"I am glad of that," said Muriel, her face brightening; "it is certainly very unlike Mr Bennett to behave in such a way."

"Ernest thinks we hear so much more gossip about people in a very small place like this; but then, what difference does that make if the gossip is true? If we were in town we mightn't know of this; but for my part, I would rather hear what people really are."

"Yes, if what we hear is true," said Muriel, gently.

"You don't believe this, then?"

"I cannot tell. I should be very sorry to believe it, and I would not do so without proof. His mother would be terribly grieved."

“Poor Mrs Bennett ! I suppose she would, though it would not be the same thing to her as it would to anybody who cared—I mean who might care—for him.”

“How so ? Does she not care more than any one ?”

“Yes, of course ; but I meant other people—any one he might care for,” said Laura, colouring brightly, and thinking Mrs Leslie rather stupid.

“Oh, you mean some one he might love,” said Muriel, simply. She never used the roundabout phrases in which Laura indulged, love being to her a thing sacred and unlike all else, and not to be described in general terms. “If there were any one,” she continued, “it would be a serious matter. I should be very sorry for her. But as it is, if he is doing anything wrong, his mother must be the chief person to grieve at it.”

“Perhaps, after all, he has done nothing to make a fuss about,” said Laura, medita-

tively. "Captain Badger may be making the most of a little fun."

Muriel looked at her. She had seen enough in her Indian life of that kind of fun, and she held strong views about it. She leant forward and laid her hand on Laura's arm.

"Do not speak so, Laura. You know that if there is any truth in this story, Mr Bennett is acting unworthily. If he once loved this girl and she is married, what has he to do with her now?"

"Oh, nothing, of course; but they might have met."

"Certainly; but their meeting, it appears, must have been noticeable. Unless they could meet quietly, without any especial thought of each other, they should have kept apart," said Muriel, earnestly.

"You are so serious, Mrs Leslie," said Laura, half crossly.

"Am I? And you try so hard to speak more lightly than you feel," returned Muriel,

with a smile ; and Laura sighed and said, "That's what Ernest tells me ; but if one begins to be serious, it will be dreadfully dull."

"I don't think so ; and if it were, would you be worse off than you are now, with the fear of being bored always before your eyes, either for yourself or your friends ?"

"I daresay not—that is a home-thrust," admitted Laura ; and with this confession Muriel was satisfied.

She thought a good deal about Ronald when she was left alone. If he really had been engaged to this girl, it was very strange that she had never heard of it. He would surely have told his mother, and mamsie would as certainly have told her ; she would never have been able to keep such a piece of news to herself. Perhaps, however, he had never said anything about his engagement, and it had been broken off quietly. That did not sound well for him, especially

if it had been because of his promotion that he had thrown the girl over, as Captain Badger had insinuated. Could the whole thing be a fabrication, or at least one of those stories which build themselves up on some grain of truth, and collapse at the first breath of inquiry? That was a pleasanter alternative to believe; but then, why should Ronald have confessed that he kept that needle-book with care; and why should he have rejoiced that the giver of it had come home? Laura, we may be sure, had been careful to tell her friend every trifle that had helped to carry conviction to her own mind.

Now that she came to think of it, Muriel remembered a day at the manse when a sudden heavy shower had detained her, and the conversation turning on the campaign, Ronald had produced a box containing a variety of relics, some curious in themselves, some which he said were interesting only to him, though he told her their history

when she asked him. Among these was a small packet in brown paper, the only thing that he did not unfold, or of which he did not speak. She noticed at the time that he put it quietly aside, and naturally forbore to question him about it; but she had little doubt now that it was the needle-book respecting which so much had been said. Why should he have concealed it, unless there was some *arrière pensée* in his mind? Had it been merely the gift of a friend, surely he would have shown it, thought Muriel, never dreaming of the true explanation—the chivalrous reserve which closed Ronald's lips about the trifle given him by the girl who had loved him in vain. He had answered Laura's question about the needle-book easily enough, thinking that she had heard nothing but Badger's tasteless jest; but in the manse drawing-room, with his mother and Muriel beside him, he could not speak indifferently of poor little Ellen Smith.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

RONALD was fully engaged during the remainder of his stay in Edinburgh, and, moreover, thought it injudicious to present himself again at Piershill. Therefore, as she had forbidden him to write, he was forced to return home without ascertaining what were the "plans" of which Mrs Jenkins had spoken.

When first he called again at Inverallan, he fancied that Muriel received him a little gravely; and while he talked to Sir Duncan of his pleasant meetings with old friends, he caught her eyes fixed upon him with a watchful, serious gaze. It was strange, un-

accountable; but some passing thought, some association of which he was unaware, must have been the cause. It could not, of course, have been produced by anything he had said, for his remarks had been of the most ordinary nature. He dismissed the matter from his mind, and walked briskly on to Broomieknowe, where he found both brother and sister at home.

Here he was subjected to a considerable amount of questioning under the guise of chaff. He thought Laura pertinacious in her curiosity, and fancied that her brother was annoyed by it; but he did his best to gratify her, even giving a ludicrous description of the reception accorded to him at the house of the very professor who had once called him an ill-mannered clown.

“And these were all the old friends you went to see?” persisted Laura.

“Oh no; there were many others, and places as well as friends. Will you think

me very ludicrous if I confess that I went to the public-house in which I took the fatal shilling?" said Ronald, turning to Hardwicke.

"Not at all; I'm rather given to that sort of sentimental pilgrimage myself."

"I also lunched at a shop in —— Street, where I met you, and you were good enough to send us in your carriage to the Gallery. It was a very kind thing to do, and I don't think I ever thanked you for it," said Ronald.

"Don't mention it. I was glad to see you. Wished I had been you. Not sure that I don't wish that still," returned Hardwicke.

"You wouldn't benefit by the change, I suspect. One wishes one's self in some one else's place now and again; but after all, if one thinks it over, one withdraws the wish."

"I shouldn't withdraw it," said Laura;

“there are lots of people with whom I would change, and be delighted. Why, one might be Baroness Burdett Coutts, for instance. Fancy having all that money !”

“And all that responsibility. I would not be in her place for a good deal. No, I confess I’ve a kind of affection for this living machine that bears my name ; and, take things all round, I never saw another with which I should like to exchange,—unless,” added Ronald, after a pause, “it were Sir Harry Wardour. The last election has given him everything man can want, I think.”

“And very likely he has some private skeleton in his cupboard that counteracts his public successes. I know nothing about him ; but one is always tempted to wonder where the shoe pinches, when one sees a man going to the top of the tree as he is doing.”

“No doubt, and that brings one back to contentment,” replied Ronald.

“Oh dear me!” sighed Laura, “what models you two are! Now I want a hundred things, and am never satisfied.”

“Because you have so much that you do want, Laura,” said her brother, laughing, “and much always wants more. Are you going, Bennett? Then I’ll walk part of the way with you.”

If Hardwicke hoped that his companion might intentionally, or by accident, enlighten him as to the source of Badger’s disparaging gossip, he was disappointed. Ronald was as pleasant and sociable as ever, but not a syllable escaped him that could even afford an opening for a question. Whether the meeting that Badger had witnessed had been accidental or not, it was clearly not among the incidents that he intended to discuss.

The time Ronald had spent in Edinburgh

had been thoroughly satisfactory. General Denver had reported him well fitted for Staff work, and the next necessary step was to pass an examination which would qualify him for admission into the Staff College. The time for this examination was rapidly approaching, and he had not much fear as to the result. He had made the most of his opportunities of study, nor had he allowed the rust of disuse to eat away what knowledge he had gained at the Edinburgh College, so that he was at least as well prepared as the majority of candidates.

As he thought of the approaching separation from Inverallan, he realised more fully the charm of his visits there. His life during this period at home had been thoroughly pleasant to him, and the conviction that it would in all probability never repeat itself, added poignancy to his regret in leaving it. It was true that he

would return home after the examination, as his entry into the College would not take place till the following February; but in July, Mrs Leslie was to pay her yearly visit to Ardenshaugh, Miss Forbes intended to visit some German baths, and in August the Hardwickses would leave for the grouse-shooting; so that, in fact, the old order of things would be entirely changed. It was so unlikely as to be almost impossible that he should ever again spend any long period at home, and he foresaw that in his absence Muriel would gather new interests about her and begin fresh duties in which he would have no share. He had made himself in some degree necessary to her of late, not only by his constant sympathy, but by taking her part, and aiding her to convince her father on one or two points connected with the estate, in respect of which he and she had held different opinions. Sir Duncan was less able than formerly to go about

the woods, and fearing to be altogether guided by Muriel's inexperience, even in matters of taste, had nevertheless yielded good-humouredly when Ronald seconded her.

It had pleased him that he could be of even so much use to her, and he had willingly spent a good deal of time and trouble in quietly ascertaining facts that she wished to know on more impartial authority than that of the overseer or factor. And now all this was nearly at an end, and Ronald resolved to make the most of the days that were left him, and no longer spent an hour in the library without also visiting the drawing-room.

It was singular, however, that he could not get rid of his impression that a change, as subtle as it was inexplicable, had taken place in the manner of both the ladies towards him. Miss Forbes showed it by a greater variability: though she seemed

always delighted to see him, there was at times a tone in her welcome that to his quick ears seemed more suited for a stranger than for one so intimate as he. In Muriel's manner, on the contrary, there was no perceptible diminution of kindness, only a shade of increase in that fine reserve that had always been one of her greatest charms.

Utterly at a loss to account for the alteration, Ronald was forced to acquiesce in it without even demanding an explanation; for so slight was it, that he felt he might have made himself ridiculous had he inquired into the cause. He even thought that the whole thing must have been the invention of his fancy, when he found himself invited one afternoon to accompany Muriel in her pony-carriage to a distant plantation, where she wished to see with her own eyes some planting of which the overseer complained.

“You might help her, Ronald,” said Sir Duncan. “She’s a knowledgeable lassie where trees are concerned, but it will take her too long to go over the ground alone. She’ll show you what is wanted, and you can help her to inspect every second rig or so.”

“With the greatest pleasure, Sir Duncan,” replied Ronald, eagerly. “And I am not altogether ignorant of the work. Do you remember when I was a small boy, how you planted up the north side of the Birksburn?”

“To be sure I do.”

“Well, I did many an hour’s work in there along with old Sandy Hewitt from Mushatt’s Haugh. I don’t know if your larch and spruce were any the better, but I thought it rare fun to play truant there.”

“Did you? Then that must have been the reason that so much of that cover

died," said Muriel, who had come up behind them with her hat on. "Here is the carriage; shall we go?"

Seated in the little Victoria, drawn by a pair of strong bay ponies that trotted rapidly along the avenue, Ronald gave himself up to the delight of the hour, hardly caring to talk, so delicious was it to sit there close to the woman he loved, watching her chiselled profile or her delicate hands. She, however, was inclined to converse; perhaps she was conscious of his mute observation, or at least he feared that she might have been so, and therefore roused himself to reply to her remarks in his usual tone. Arrived at the plantation, they left the carriage, and for more than an hour went up and down the long lines of young trees, trying plant after plant, in order to see that the work had been properly done.

Muriel inherited her father's love for his

wood, and he had early taught her something of woodcraft. Ronald pacing along the rig that it was his turn to inspect, and seeing her quick movements and interested face, thought how well she was suited to her present life, and wished wildly that he could have been her land agent even, rather than exchange her society and the fresh healthy country life for the narrow streets and wearisome gaieties of a small garrison town. He had been growing less keen of late about his profession. Now that his prospect of active service was over, at least for the present, his country tastes began to reassert themselves, and he thought with impatience of daily parades and orderly-room work. It was not his nature, however, to grumble or harass himself with useless repinings. He was a soldier, and for the present meant to push his way if he could. Some day, perhaps, he would decide on a different career, and

in that case would probably leave the army as suddenly as he had entered it.

Muriel cut short his reflections by telling him that she had completed her share of the inspection, and asking his opinion of the work, and they talked the matter over as they walked to the fence. At the carriage-step she hesitated a moment—"Would you mind driving? The ponies will pull going home, and my hands get tired."

"Not a bit—if you don't mind trusting the ponies to my inexperience," said Ronald, taking the reins.

The bays went steadily enough, only needing stronger wrists than those of their mistress to govern them; and after the first half-mile Ronald endeavoured to resume the conversation that had been interrupted. But now it was Muriel who was absent and disinclined to talk, and Ronald concluded that her thoughts had been wandering East-

wards—as was too often the case when he was by—for she presently asked him a question about his life in India during the first years of his stay.

“Did you make many friends there?” she continued.

“Yes, of a certain kind,” he replied. “One lady, who knew me at Hubblepore, was good enough to ask me to her house when I was on my way home. I must have spoken to you of her—a Mrs Emerson.”

“Yes, I think you have. What is her husband?”

“A captain in the 100th Sikhs, and a very nice fellow.”

“And was she the lady you knew best?”

“I could hardly be said to know her. She allowed me to act with her,” said Ronald, turning to look at his companion. “You forget I was only a non-commissioned officer in those days.”

"She knows you now, then?" she replied, smiling.

"Yes, and was kindness itself when I stayed in her house; but of course I was only on sufferance in the theatrical club because they wanted an actor."

"But they knew your history, I suppose?" said Muriel.

"I fancy so, and probably that influenced them in bringing me among them. I cannot tell, however. By the by, there was one young lady who used to talk as though I were a prince in disguise," said Ronald, with a smile.

"And who was she?"

He paused, rather surprised at the interest Muriel was showing in these old days.

"It is very absurd; but for the life of me, I cannot recollect her name," he said, musingly.

Muriel glanced at him, and waited a

moment; but no name was forthcoming, and she continued her questions.

"It must have been a strange life for you altogether. Had you many friends in the ranks, among the sergeants or their wives?"

"What do you mean by a friend? I had many good comrades in the sergeants' mess — shrewd, good-hearted, sensible fellows; but—I don't think I'm proud—I never at any time felt that they were among my friends. I have not many friends," he added, gravely.

"I should have fancied you had many," said Muriel.

"Would you? I wonder why?"

"I think you have the power of making yourself liked. You are a favourite with almost every one round here."

"I wish I thought I had that power," rejoined Ronald, in a low voice; "but if I have, it must fail me where I need it

most. I have pleasant acquaintances, but few friends. Sir Duncan is the best and kindest I have ever known."

He could not at that moment have spoken of her own long friendship with a steady voice; and something in his face must have warned her, for she rather hurriedly returned to her point.

"But was there no one among the sergeants' wives to take an interest in you? I used to see some of them in the 66th, and they were such kindly, pleasant women."

"I daresay I might have known them better had I wished it, but I did not. With the men I could get on well; but somehow the contrast between the women and the society I was accustomed to struck me more sharply. Perhaps you cannot understand that," said Ronald, more stiffly than he had ever spoken to her before. It hurt him that she should imagine him

to have gone to the soldiers' wives for companionship. It seemed to mark again the distance that in her mind must separate him from her.

"I think I can understand," said Muriel. "Still there might have been exceptions, and your life must have been to some degree a lonely one."

"One resigns one's self to the inevitable, you know, more or less; and I contrived to be very happy on the whole. There were plenty of incidents that I can look back on with pleasure; and I met with much kindness—far more than I deserved," answered Ronald, bringing the ponies round at the door of the Hall.

"And have none of these old friends come home—Mrs Emerson, or your nameless young lady, or any one you liked? It would be pleasant if you met any of them in this country," said Muriel, slowly removing the plaid that lay across her knee.

“I do not even know where any of them are, so I fear there is very little chance of that,” said Ronald, laying down the reins and taking the plaid.

“Thanks — never mind it. Will you come in and have tea?” said Muriel, in such a strangely cold and altered voice that he paused, bewildered.

“I thought I was to report upon the trees?” he said, hesitatingly; and she answered quickly, as though to cover a mistake—

“Oh yes; papa will expect to hear. Pray come in.”

Over the five-o'clock tea they discussed the planting, and Sir Duncan's eyes were as kind as his daughter's were cold. Ronald even fancied that she avoided meeting his look, and a feeling of indignation began to rise in his mind. What had he done — what could he possibly have said — that should give Muriel a right to repel

him in this sudden fashion. Lover as he was, he was too manly, too high-spirited, to submit quietly to a woman's caprice; and though he had never suspected Muriel of such a weakness, he could call her present behaviour by no other name.

The moment he had finished his tea he rose to go, and Muriel felt that her change of manner had been detected, and wondered if he would divine its cause.

"How could he—how could he," she said to herself when she reached her own room—"how could he tell me that he did not know where any of them were, when he had seen *her* in Edinburgh?" She thought that her question had been worded in such a way that the answer to it must throw some light on the gossip that had been repeated to her; but no sign of self-consciousness, no shadow of reserve, had troubled Ronald's voice or gaze as he replied to her.

In simple truth, he was thinking at the moment of the ladies of Hubblepore, and did not dream of including Ellen Smith among the acquaintances to whom Muriel alluded.

She, indignant and disappointed, thought much of the conversation that had passed between them. Ronald had been so invariably good and thoughtful — he had responded so readily to every wish of hers, and had shown such discrimination, such good taste, in their meetings—that it was natural she should be bitterly vexed at what seemed a great unworthiness in him. She was almost glad that he was going away, so that the matter might be allowed to drop. If he had been remaining at home, she must have taken some step — must have spoken to her father or Mrs Bennett—for she could not have had him in the house on the same footing as before, with this unexplained affair always troubling her.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## JAMIE'S FALL.

As though to add to Muriel's trouble, an event happened, in which, but for the conversation recorded in the last chapter, she would naturally have turned to Ronald for help. Going to the new houses to visit some of the tenants, she stopped as usual at Jamie Paterson's door. She knocked twice without hearing any answer, and was going away when a door on the other side of the passage opened, and a boy looked out.

"Good-day, Tom," said Muriel; "do you know if Jamie's out?"

"Na, he isna oot; he's in his bed."

"What! is he ill, then? Has he seen Dr M'Arthur?" asked Muriel, anxiously.

The boy grinned. "Na—he disna need the doctor; he's no' ill—he's drunk!"

Muriel gazed at the unwashed face a moment,—“Drunk!” she repeated, slowly,—“are you sure?”

“Ou ay! I ken fine. He was at the feein' fair yestreen, and feyther and lang Jock helpit him up the stair. He was awfu' bad.”

Muriel went down-stairs without another word; but nothing that had happened in the village since she came home had vexed her as much as this falling away on the part of the old shoemaker. What was to be done? She shrank from the idea of speaking to or even seeing him herself, and she knew no one to whom she could appeal with the slightest hope of any good result, except Ronald, and to him she could not bring herself to write. Yesterday's conversation was still too fresh in her mind; she could not have expressed herself with

her usual readiness. She would write to Mrs Bennett—that would be her best plan ; and hastening home, she despatched the following note :—

“DEAR MAMSIE,—I am so vexed, so disappointed ! Poor old Jamie is tipsy again. He was at that fair yesterday, (what mischief those gatherings do !) and came home ‘vera bad.’ Of course I did not see him. Could Ronald go to him ? We must try to save him from himself.—Ever your affectionate  
MURIEL.”

“Dear, dear ! what a pity !” exclaimed Mrs Bennett ; “though I always feared that this would happen ;” and she handed the note to her son, who read it with hurt surprise.

“Why did she not write to me ?” was his instant thought. “She would have done so a fortnight ago. What can be the meaning

of it?" Whatever might be the meaning, there was but one thing to be done—he must go up to Jamie's at once.

He found the shoemaker a miserable figure, unkempt and dirty, crouching on his bench, while the unswept room and empty grate, below which yesterday's ashes still lay, showed that there had been no great attempt at breakfast that morning. A hunch of stale bread lay broken on a plate, and beside it stood a jug of not very clean water.

"Well, Jamie, I've come up to sit a bit with you," began Ronald; but Jamie lifted a lowering face and bade him begone.

"I'm no' for ony mair advice—I dinna need it, and naeboddy's to come pryin' aboot here; I'm no' in the humour for't. There's been a woman here the day, but she gaed awa' quicker nor she came."

Ronald looked at the old man, and went forward to his side.

“ I didn’t come to give you advice ; I’ve oftener come to get it. You’ve never turned an old friend out of your house before, Jamie, and I don’t believe you’re going to begin now. It won’t be hospitable if you do.”

“ That’s true. Weel, ye can sit doun, but dinna bide ower lang. I like to be my lane whiles.”

“ Have you had breakfast yet ? ”

“ Breakfast ! no,” replied Jamie, with a shudder. “ I’ll gang oot in a whilie and get some at the Rob Roy.”

He said it defiantly, and Ronald made no reply, for the Rob Roy was the worst public-house in Tillybogle.

“ Mrs Leslie was here yesterday,” said he.

“ —— ! ” Jamie’s answer was an oath ; and Ronald, observing him, felt that there was a hold upon him still.

“ I shouldn’t wonder if she were to come back to see you.”

“ I’ll be oot,—I’m awa’ to the Rob Roy.

Whaur's my coat?" said Jamie, getting up and looking round.

"You'll not," said Ronald firmly, laying a hand on his arm; "you'll not be such a coward."

The old man turned upon him fiercely, but Ronald went on in the same firm quiet tone.

"You've fought a brave fight for years, and you'll not run away now and lose the respect of your best friends. You'll stay at home and see Mrs Leslie if she comes."

"Man, I canna!"

"Then you'll grieve her, and she has troubles enough of her own to bear. She said the other day that the cheeriest sight in the village was your nice room."

"Did she?" said Jamie, looking round uneasily.

"She did, and you should have seen how pleased she looked."

"She'll no' be pleased the neist time she

comes. I'm just feared to face her, and I'm awfu' drouthy."

"Come home with me and get some breakfast."

"That I'll *no'* do," replied Jamie, decisively. He would not go to the manse if he could help it, for he and Mr Bennett had had "words" more than once. The minister thought to do his duty by admonishing him, but Jamie resented fiercely any such interference.

"Then let me fetch you some tea. I'll do it, if you'll give me your word to wait for me," said Ronald.

"Weel, I'll bide, gin you're no' lang," returned the old man, and he resumed his former seat.

"Make me some strong tea, as quick as you can, Nancy," said Ronald, hurrying in to the manse, and explaining his errand; and while the tea was making, he wrote and despatched the following note:—

“DEAR MRS LESLIE,—Jamie is gruff and sorry, and afraid of seeing you. I’m taking him tea. Could you come down in half an hour, when I have left? I wish his room could be brightened a little. I’ll get it done, if he will go out this afternoon. Could you send him some soda-water? I am a little afraid of the Rob Roy by-and-by.—Yours sincerely,

“RONALD BENNETT.”

He then took the hot tea to the shoemaker, and having seen him drink a few mouthfuls, went away somewhat hastily, promising to look in again later.

Muriel thought over his note, and in a short time had started for the village, with a bunch of flowers in her dress, and carrying a small basket, in which many good things went to the sick. Softly opening Jamie’s door, she stepped lightly in, and laying down her basket, went up to him,

where he sat with his back to the door, and touched him on the shoulder.

“How are you, Jamie? I came down to see if I could do anything for you,” said she, gently.

Jamie half turned his head towards her, but without looking up.

“Better gang yer ways—gang yer ways hame, and fash yersel’ nae mair about an auld fule like me.”

“Do you think that is the way I treat my friends, the moment they’re in trouble? I hope to pay you many a visit, and see you as comfortable as ever, for years to come. Things will look better to-morrow, Jamie.”

“Ay, maybe they wull; but they’re unco black the day.”

“Well, you must just win through till to-morrow comes, Jamie; it is what I have had to do myself,” said Muriel, with a catch in her voice. “But I am forgetting; I brought

something that I thought you might like," she continued,—and going to the table behind him, she made her preparations deftly and quickly.

First she spread a small white napkin, and laid on it a bottle of soda-water and a lemon. Next she squeezed another into a tumbler that she had brought, and drawing a second bottle of soda-water, she carried the foaming drink to the old man.

"Try it, Jamie ; I think you will like it," she said.

With a glance of wonder he took the tumbler and drained it, and looking up at last in her face, ejaculated, "That's grand ! And wha wad hae thocht of your bringin' it to me ! What is't ?"

"Just soda-water and lemon—that's all. Now, Jamie, I can't stay, for I have things to see to at home ; but I shall come back to-morrow, and I trust to you to let me find that you have 'win through.' One

swallow doesn't make a summer, and one slip doesn't make a failure ; read 'The Northern Cobbler,' and try again," said Muriel, holding out her hand.

The shoemaker took it almost reverently, and said in a softened voice, "I'll no' promise, but I'll try."

"Thank you heartily. And now good-bye till to-morrow," answered she, and went away, after laying on the napkin the bunch of sweet-smelling pinks that she had worn.

After the door closed upon her, Jamie sat on for a while, lacking courage to begin the inevitable "redding up ;" but at last he rose, stretched himself, and turning round, his eye lighted upon the table by the door. He crossed the room, and stood a moment looking at the dainty array ; she had left even the silver pocket-knife with which she cut the lemon. Then he took up the flowers and examined them, his face working the while.

“I mind the vera same floers in my mither’s bit garden. What was’t she aye tell’t me to say?—‘Be merciful to me a sinner,—to me a sinner,’” repeated the old man, while the slow tears gathered in his eyes, and fell at last upon the flowers. “Greetin’!” muttered he; “weel, weel, I’m like a bairn the day, a’thing’s strange and by-ordinar. I haena thocht o’ yon words this twenty year,” and he sighed, and began to busy himself slowly and clumsily about the house.

But a few minutes had elapsed before Ronald returned; he had seen Muriel go along the street on her homeward way, and was anxious to know how she had fared.

“Did ye meet her? she’s jist now awa.”

“No,” replied Ronald.

“See yon!” exclaimed Jamie, pointing to the table. “She mixed a drink for me hersel’, and when she gaed awa’ I fand these—ay, and thae bit floers. My mither

aye tell't me aboot the angels; I mind o't weel, though I didna heed her muckle at the time. Yon's ane o' them; she'd gie ye her bonny hand to help ye oot o' the vera mire o' hell."

"She would, God bless her!" said Ronald reverently, and Jamie's brusque nod showed that he echoed the prayer.

"Come out with me, Jamie," said Ronald; "the day's fresh, and you'll be all the better for a turn; come as far as the Fall with me."

"Ou, I maun be seein' to the hoose and a mouthfu' o' denner."

"I'll help you with both when we come back,—come away," said Ronald, taking him by the arm and putting his cap into his hand.

"Ye aye hae yer way; I dinna ken what's wrang wi' me," said Jamie, shaking his head, but he allowed himself to be led away; and as the cool air blew upon his hot brow, and Ronald's talk broke in upon his depression,

he straightened himself, and began to feel as if the cheerier morrow were not so very far off.

During his absence Nancy, with good Mrs M'Rorie's ready help, had accomplished wonders in the way of cleaning and tidying the neglected room ; and when he returned, Ronald accompanying him to the door, he found everything put straight—the bed made, a fire burning clearly, the bread and cheese set out, and even some rashers of bacon laid ready in the frying-pan.

“ Mair angels' wark, eh ? Puir things ! they've had a sair time o't wi' me,” said Jamie, with a returning twinkle in his eyes as he surveyed the room.

“ I think I'll leave you to their company to-day, but I'll see you to-morrow ; and by the by, here's 'Oliver Twist,' that you wanted to read,” said Ronald, laying the book on the table.

“ Ay, that's weel thocht o' ; I'll be nane

the waur o' that," said Jamie, who knew, as Ronald did, that the temptation of yesterday would at some hour or other return in full force.

To his honour be it said, he neither then nor on any subsequent occasion yielded to it, but was wont to observe that he had learnt "a wheen things" at the time of his last downfall that he had never known before—a remark which puzzled all who heard it, with the exception of Ronald, and perhaps old Nancy.

The same consciousness of something amiss which kept the former from returning to Inverallan, prevented Muriel from visiting the manse for a day or two after the incidents just narrated; but it chanced that she and Ronald met at last in the village street, and began, of course, to speak of the shoemaker.

"You have saved him, Mrs Leslie," said Ronald.

“With your help,” returned she. “You have as much influence over him as I have.”

“Do you think so? Shall I tell you what he said of you?” asked Ronald, and in brief words repeated Jamie’s remark about the angels.

The ready tears rose to Muriel’s eyes. “Poor old Jamie! Oh, I do hope he may keep straight now!” she said, earnestly.

“I think he will; and he will owe his new life to you. You are doing a noble work. Will you let me say for once how I reverence you for it?” replied Ronald, in a low voice.

Muriel looked up into his grave kind face, and her heart smote her. Surely she had done him injustice, or there must be some mistake. It was impossible that he could have lied, and especially, whispered an inward voice—especially to her.

“I wish I deserved your faith in me, Ronald. I know, you see, where I am

weakest, and that there is nothing for you to reverence. But at the same time, it makes one very happy when one's friends believe in one," she answered, with that tender smile in her eyes of which Hardwicke had once said, that it made him think somehow of a summer moonlight—a remark that had filled his matter-of-fact sister with profound astonishment; but then she had never known the love that makes the dullest nature at times almost poetical.

"You are right there. There is nothing more inspiring, and nothing depresses one more than to be mistrusted by those whose opinions we value," replied Ronald. He was thinking of old days in which it had seemed to him that every one was against him, and of the effect of such a belief on his mind and conduct; but Muriel, conscious of her own misgivings, took the remark as an implied rebuke. The time was coming when each of them would recall

these words, and wonder sadly if the other, too, remembered them.

Ronald had yet to pay a heavy price for the mingled curiosity and interest which had prompted him to pay a visit to Ellen Jenkins at Piershill; and she, who had loved him, and to whom he was as a hero, was to burden his life, and try his generosity sorely. She was one of the women—of whom, alas! there are too many—who will, like the Pharisees of old, lay upon the man they trust every grievous weight that should rest upon their own shoulders, but who, in return for his support, have neither courage nor wisdom to impart. They are grown children, always asking, always receiving, but with none of the child's joyous confidence to bestow.

Like the rest of us, Ellen Jenkins might have been different had circumstances been in her favour; but from the day on which her father had partly cajoled, partly rea-

soned her into accepting the riding-master, her self-respect had diminished, and, as an inevitable consequence, her character had steadily deteriorated in strength and in all its finer qualities. She had not exaggerated her husband's evil qualities; indeed, in speaking to Ronald, shame had induced her to conceal his most flagrant faults. She had long meditated over the possibility of escape even during her married life in India; and when the order came for the regiment to go home, she imagined that the time of release was at hand. In England, where she could easily find a lawyer to help her, she would be able to obtain a divorce.

For a while, however, after landing, her husband had behaved better. She herself, too, amidst the novelty and excitement of such a change—for she had been in the East since she was almost a baby—found herself, if not happier, at least better amused and more interested; and when Jenkins took

her to the Crystal Palace (for the —th was quartered near London), or to Bushey Park, she forgot her troubles in admiring the huge shining walls and roof of the one, with its model buildings and glittering stalls, and the green pyramids of foliage in the other, amid which the stately horse-chestnut blossoms were in full array.

She thought the company amusing too, for Jenkins was not the man to indulge in a romantic expedition with only his wife for companion, although she was a pretty woman. He took her with him out of a sort of momentary good-nature, and perhaps a certain embarrassment in setting her altogether aside; but it was for the rest of the party that the affair was in reality arranged. During the first afternoon all went well. Ellen was absorbed in the sights of the Palace, and wandered away with only one companion into the Alhambra and other courts. He, she understood,

belonged to one of the theatres, and she felt a little vexed that he treated her almost as if she were a child. At Bushey Park, however, where the picnic was long, and the day too warm for rambling, Ellen began to perceive into what kind of society she had fallen, and there ensued a stormy scene on their return home, which had only one result, that the next time the riding-master went out, he went alone.

From that time her troubles had not only recommenced, but had been increased ten-fold through the growing petulance of her own temper—a failing induced, no doubt, by the condition of nervous fear in which she lived, and by the solitariness of her existence. She did not make friends easily ; and, moreover, there were but two or three married officers in the —th, and with their wives she had hardly any opportunity of associating. To her sociable nature—accustomed to the easy chat in

the verandah and the friendly neighbourliness of her Indian life — the dulness of English skies and English barracks seemed something overwhelming.

If her English quarters were trying to her, the change to Piershill completed her misery. That dismal square was to her little short of a prison-house, planted as it is on a dirty road, too far from Edinburgh for the pleasures of town to be within easy reach, and too far from the Firth for the daily enjoyment of sea air — at least so far as the soldiers' wives are concerned; indeed the turreted city jail, whose narrow windows look towards Arthur's Seat, might be thought the preferable residence of the two.

She did not like walking; and when she emerged from the huge gates of the square, the prospect was so uninviting, the road so grimy, the pathway so badly kept, the country so tame and ugly, that after a

few minutes' stroll she crept in again, and seldom left her rooms except for necessary shopping.

What needlework she was forced to do she did. But where was the use of making pretty things when no one ever came to see them? The only real amusement she could obtain was the perusal of a sensation novel. This unhealthy pleasure she thoroughly enjoyed; and if Jenkins ever found a colour in her cheeks or a sparkle in her eye, it was when the exciting and overstrained pages of 'The Madman's Mystery' or the woes of 'Etheldreda's Evil Hour' had enabled her to forget for a while his very existence, and almost her own.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## THE BEGINNING OF DOUBT.

As time went on, Mrs Jenkins learnt that she had but little chance of obtaining the divorce for which she had once hoped. Even her scanty knowledge, though she had increased it as far as possible by a careful perusal of the daily papers, showed her that to effect her end money would be required; and it was rather as a forlorn-hope, and to set the matter at rest, that she had arranged to pay that visit to the lawyer in Edinburgh, which ended so unfortunately for Ronald, owing to Captain Badger's presence at the station.

Into this blank monotonous life of hers

Ronald had stepped like a prince in a fairy tale—handsome, kind, and ready to give generous help and sympathy. Before he came home she had often in her lonely hours thought of him as she had seen him in the happy days at Hubblepore, and often she had wondered if he were much changed. She knew, of course, that he had won honour—“as I felt sure he would,” she had said to herself enthusiastically; and it seemed to her that all the regiment must be greater because he was in it. And now, in spite of promotion—when, no doubt, he had crowds of friends and plenty to amuse him—he had remembered her, and had chosen to come all the way to those dreadful barracks to see her! No wonder she felt cheered, almost elated, by his visit. Unfortunately Jenkins was not as well pleased at it as she, although he had known well of her liking for Ronald before he married her. He had been glad

to carry off the prettiest girl in the station, without troubling his head greatly about the state of her feelings towards himself; marriage would soon, he thought, cure her of any nonsense. It was a different thing, however, when the man she had liked took the trouble to come and see her years after her marriage. Jenkins was as jealous of his wife as he was lax as to his own morals, and thought that Bennett ought to have forgotten all about her long ago.

The angry discussion that ensued, in which Ellen passionately declared that Mr Bennett was a gentleman incapable of doing a wrong thing, embittered the feeling on both sides; and unhappily for Ronald, she soon began to think of him as a possible aid—a friend whom she could trust and who would assist her to run away, if there were no other method by which she could obtain her freedom. Only

a little more tyranny would fill her cup to overflowing, and before long the final drop was poured in.

When the letters arrived at the manse one morning, one addressed in an unfamiliar hand was laid beside Ronald's plate, the perusal of which caused him evident vexation.

"What is wrong, Ronald?" inquired his mother, whose eyes, if they had failed somewhat for other uses, were as quick as ever to note the changes on her son's face.

"A friend — that is to say, an old acquaintance of mine is in trouble, mother," he replied; "I may need your advice about her by-and-by."

*Her!* The syllable did not please Mrs Bennett's ear. What should her boy have to do with any woman's troubles? She did not invite any confidence, and it was not till he had re-read and thought over his letter that Ronald sought her again.

“Can you spare me a few minutes now, mother?” he said, coming into the parlour, where she was sitting darning one of her fine homespun tablecloths.

“Surely, my dear. Come and sit down beside me.”

“Suppose you knew of a woman whose husband ill-used and insulted her, and suppose she determined to leave him—you would help her, wouldn’t you?”

“That is rather a broad question. I would need to be very sure of her,” replied Mrs Bennett.

“Cautiously said, mother. Well, I will tell you the case as far as I can,” answered Ronald, and he briefly recounted the chief facts, omitting, of course, any reference to Ellen’s *penchant* for himself. His mother noted the weak point in his tale.

“What makes her come to you of all people?” she inquired, promptly.

“Because she has no friends. Her father

is dead, she is an only child, and I don't suppose she knows anything of his relations, if there are any. She went out to India as a small child, and lived there till this last year."

"But why doesn't she go to a lawyer?"

"Because divorce is a luxury for the rich; and even if she had money, she would probably not get one. There's some trick of the law by which, if she has condoned an offence, she cannot claim freedom. I don't understand it, but it is the case."

"Humph! It is very unfortunate that she should go for assistance to a young man like you."

"Therefore I want a kind old lady like you to help her," returned Ronald, smiling.

"Suppose you were to let her come here for a few days, just to look about her."

"I'm certain your father would never allow it."

“Why not?”

“Well, you can ask him, but I’m sure of it.”

“There is no use in asking him, if you mean to object yourself. Will you not do this for me, mother? I am sorry for the girl; she is a mere child still.”

Mrs Bennett paused, then asked a shrewd question. “If she came here, would you mind if Muriel saw her?”

“Mind! I should beg Mrs Leslie to help her if she could. What a strange question!” ejaculated Ronald, looking at his mother with unfeigned surprise.

“Then I’d be willing to help her, to please you; but you’ll see—your father will forbid it.”

Mrs Bennett was right; her husband’s views were clear and decided. It would not be fitting that the manse should be a refuge for a woman who had left her husband. She was probably in fault too,

he remarked, with that easy assumption that is so readily made at a woman's expense. In any case, he could have nothing to do with such a matter outside the bounds of his own parish; and he added a remark or two on the sacredness of marriage, to which Ronald, thinking of the red and sensual face of the riding-master, could hardly assent. Marriage as it was in this instance, was terribly unlike marriage as it ought to be.

"It is as you thought, mother," said he, returning to the parlour; "my scheme is not to be carried out."

"What will you do, then?"

"I must tell the poor thing that I cannot help her. It will not be an easy task," said Ronald regretfully, and he left the room.

Mrs Jenkins had begged him to address his answer to a small shop where she was in the habit of dealing, and to write, if possible, by return of post. As he sat

down to reply to her wild appeal, he thought once more whether there were no way in which he could assist her; but seeing none, was forced to write and explain his refusal in the gentlest words that he could find.

Next morning but one brought a fresh epistle, written this time somewhat less guardedly than the last, and explaining more fully both her position and her plans. The former was more painful even than he had imagined. He supposed that she was not altogether without blame, and she had certainly been wrong in allowing herself to be persuaded into a loveless marriage. For this, however, he could not greatly find fault with her. Knowing, as he did, the business-like way in which such contracts are entered into among soldiers in India, he could imagine the sort of pressure that was applied to make her yield, and the amount of resistance

and foresight that could alone have enabled her to maintain her ground against it.

That Jenkins was a scoundrel did not make it easier for any one to interfere in the matter ; yet Ellen's statements roused every particle of chivalry in his nature, and prompted him to run the risk of being called to account for his part in the affair rather than leave her to her fate. Her plan too, so far as she explained it, seemed both feasible and wise, and he hastened to write and promise her his assistance in carrying it out.

He was to go to London for an examination in three days' time, and he informed her of the hour of the train by which he was to leave ; it was the night express from Waverley Station. That done, he began his farewell calls and preparations, and first he went to Broomieknowe.

The Hardwicks were at home, and received him cordially.

"We were afraid you meant to go off without coming to us at all," said Ernest.

"I should hardly have done that, after spending so many pleasant hours here."

"We shall miss you dreadfully, Mr Bennett; we are just going to get up some theatricals, and you will be such a loss. You are going quite at the wrong time," said Laura, plaintively.

"I am very sorry, Miss Hardwicke. I might have represented your case to the examiners had I known sooner, and they might have let me off."

"You are very unfeeling! You know how hard it is to get up anything here, and how very few gentlemen will help us. Those that will, don't know how; and those that can, won't."

"Then why do you do it?" said Ernest, *sotto voce*.

"Oh, for fifty excellent reasons, all of

which you have heard and forgotten. When do you return, Mr Bennett?"

"I do not exactly know. Not for a considerable time. Indeed I don't suppose I shall ever make a really long stay here again."

"Indeed! I am sorry to hear it," said Hardwicke. "How is that?"

"Why, you see the regiment will come home before I have done with the college, and of course after that I get only the usual two and a half months' leave."

"Is there no chance of your being sent to the depot at Stirling?"

"I do not know. Of course it would be a capital thing if I could manage that."

"While Captain Badger is there?" inquired Laura, archly.

"I should prefer joining at the expiry of his time there, I confess," said Ronald.

"Will you tell me something?" said she suddenly, looking him full in the face,

while her brother waited uneasily to hear what the question might be.

“I will if I can,” replied Ronald, a little amused.

“Does Captain Badger speak the truth?” asked Laura abruptly, and as she spoke the colour dyed her cheeks scarlet.

Ronald would have answered the question lightly enough but for this sudden confusion, which embarrassed him. If it meant that she took any special interest in Badger, she was putting him in a somewhat unfair position; and he was at a loss for any other explanation. However, he could not but answer truly himself, though he might choose the least discourteous phrase he could, so he replied—

“I think he allows himself to hold very mistaken ideas, and he likes to express very black views of his fellow-creatures.”

“I thought so! Thank you, Mr Bennett, I wanted very much to know,”

answered Laura enigmatically, and resumed the crewel-work that she laid down while she spoke.

"I must really go," said Ronald at last, rising.

Laura looked up at him with very kindly eyes. "I am very sorry you are going away; don't forget us quite. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Miss Hardwicke. You and your brother have been so good to me that I shall often wish myself back here," answered Ronald, shaking hands with her warmly.

With all her faults, hers was a bright nature, and he began to think that he had not done her justice in his thoughts.

At Inverallan he spent a longer time, remaining to luncheon, and lingering on, unwilling to tear himself away. The ladies here knew more of his probable movements, and one at least was unfeignedly sorry to lose him.

Miss Forbes had had time to reflect upon the gossip repeated to her in the conservatory at Broomieknowe, and had come to the conclusion that it was pleasanter as well as more convenient to ignore it. It might or it might not be true, but in the meantime Ronald was very agreeable, and they had so few neighbours, that they could ill afford to quarrel with one who was at any time a pleasant addition to their party, and besides, so conveniently near at hand if they wanted to fill another place at dinner. Something of this sort she said to Muriel, who smiled, and while admitting the convenience, said she hardly thought that bore upon the question.

“I think it does, my dear, with practical people. Duncan never was practical in social matters, and you are like him. One must shut one’s eyes sometimes. One cannot inquire into the morals of every one one knows.”

“Certainly not; we should require to have a sort of perpetual *Vehmgericht* at work. But there is a difference between prying into the conduct of one’s slight acquaintances, and caring to know the truth about one’s friends.”

“Oh yes, of course; and really you have become so very intimate with Ronald Bennett,” began Miss Forbes, discontentedly; but she did not finish her sentence, for Muriel finished it for her—“That I care more about his conduct than about using him as a stop-gap at a dinner-party? You are right, aunt—I do.”

Miss Forbes said no more. She began to think that it was a good thing that Ronald was going to the Staff College, for she did not want any new perplexities introduced into their life at the Hall.

When Ronald came in, she chatted away to him with quite her old pleasantness and confidence. As he listened to her little

histories, and learnt how the station-master had delayed an important parcel of fancy-work for fully two hours, and how the postmistress was very tiresome about a money-order, insisting on having names filled in that she—Miss Forbes—could not possibly be expected to know anything about, and how it ought to be quite enough when people well known gave their word for a matter of the sort,—he felt that he was fully restored to his place in her favour. Whatever shadow had crossed her mind had now passed away, and he was almost driven to conclude that he must have been guilty at some time or other of awkwardness or stupidity that had annoyed her.

Of Muriel he did not feel so sure. There had been a return to her old friendliness since the affair of Jamie Paterson; and yet more than once he fancied there was a something in her glance, a polished tone in

her voice, to which he was unaccustomed. To-day these were less apparent; but he found her grave, almost sad, and thought, with a sigh, poor fellow, that had nothing of complaint in it, that her heart was too much absorbed, too perpetually full of remembrance and affection for the dead, to spare a regret for him, although he was going away.

True, he was only going to London; but though the distance was small, he knew that he was entering on occupations which would necessarily remove him from this sweet country life, and from the dear presence of the woman he loved.

"I suppose you are glad to return to work?" said Miss Forbes, turning at last from her own small vexations.

"I ought to be, but I fear I am not. I think I would rather find my work in a country life than elsewhere."

"Dear me! that is surely a new taste

for you, is it not ?” returned Miss Forbes, a little tartly. She thought the remark might cover some deeper meaning than appeared, some hint for Muriel’s ear.

“Not at all. My ambition as a boy was to be a colonist. I should like to be a farmer on a really large scale.”

“It would be an interesting life,” said Muriel.

“Yes indeed ; and to tell the truth, the interest of my present work ceases with peace—at least to a great extent. I feel that there is a great deal of useless show and idleness about us at home. You know the proverb, ‘Soldiers in peace are like chimneys in summer.’”

“So Frank used to say,” said Muriel, softly. “I remember his telling me that he thought the most thoroughly bored men he knew, were in the service.”

“And no wonder. When your work takes a fifth or sixth of your time, and all the rest

is play and eating, what can a man do but be bored? Even that is an occupation."

"Why shouldn't you turn farmer yet?" said Sir Duncan.

"There is one excellent reason—want of capital. I could hardly emigrate and buy land on the proceeds of my present profession," said Ronald, laughing.

"Things can be managed, however," said Sir Duncan, thoughtfully, "though I did not mean to propose that you should emigrate. Your mother would never be able to bear it."

"I was thinking of that," interposed Muriel. She had looked up at Ronald as if to see his expression while he spoke.

"Of course not," continued her father. "What I meant was, that if you really cared to make that your career, you should turn your attention to it at once. A land agency is a capital appointment."

"No doubt; but it would be unlike what

I had thought of. A land agent must please his master, but my old dream was to own land myself. I used to fancy I would try experiments, which of course should succeed, and I would make a name as a great colonist. But I could never break away now from the ties that keep me at home, —they are too strong,” said Ronald, with eyes fixed on the carpet.

Muriel turned hers away. What ties did he mean? It was not of his father he spoke. Who besides his mother could keep him at home? Was this an involuntary admission, an unintentional allusion to that person in Edinburgh? Or had he some other friends of whose existence she was unaware? In either case, he was not as open as she had once imagined.

This fresh doubt brought back the air of constraint that had disappeared during these last few days, and it was with an aching heart that Ronald bade her adieu,

although she said with grave kindness, "I hope you may be successful in your examination." The wish would have been more precious had it been uttered in the old frank way.

Beautiful and sweet as she was, was he not a fool, he asked himself, to cherish a passion so utterly wasted and futile as this for her? Would he not be wiser if he were to tear it out of his heart<sup>s</sup>, and were to turn his attention and will exclusively to his work? Even as the question arose, the answer came also: not while he lived would he give up loving her—and with all her reserve, she could not prevent his faithful homage; and that thought gave him a feeling almost of delight as he walked homewards down the avenue, where the trees were in the full glory of early summer foliage, and the air was full of the rich scent of the lime-blossoms, in which myriads of bees hummed ceaselessly at their toil.

His last visit was to Jamie Paterson, whom he found at work, looking as busy and "canty" as though feeling fairs and their consequences were unknown to him.

"Sae ye're gangin' awa' again?" said he. "It'll be dreich for Mistress Bennett when she's left alane."

"I'm afraid it will; but mothers can hardly expect to have their sons at home always, and I'm not likely to be out of Britain again for a good many years to come."

"That'll be a comfort. She'll ken what ye're at; but if ye gang ower the seas, there's nae tellin' whaur ye are or what ye're aifter."

"Well, soldiers do write home whiles, Jamie."

"Ou ay; an' maybe when the letter comes, the man's deid that sent it. Ye micht as weel hae dealin's wi' a fire-flaught as wi' a sodger."

“I know we’re a good-for-nothing set, Jamie ; you’d like to disestablish us all, and let country and colonies take care of themselves,” said Ronald, with a laugh.

“No jist exactly that. I wadna hae the colonies in ither folks’ hands, for they’re a gran’ feedin’-ground for hungry lads. Nor I wadna like to see foreigners meddlin’ wi’ oor ain bit island neither.”

“So we are a necessary evil—you admit that ?”

“Weel, it’s an admeesion that I canna weel deny ; but that disna prevent me frae wussin’ *my* freends weel oot o’ sic an unchancy profession.”

“All right, Jamie ; and while you’re preaching against the service down here, I hope I may be getting up a step in London.”

“Ou ay ; ye’ll be a general yet, nae doot. It isna what I’d hae fancied for ye mysel’, but we’ll hae to pit up wi’t—we’ll

hae to pit up wi't," said Jamie, with a pawky twinkle in his eyes.

"Thank you, Jamie. I'll not try you as much as that, so you needn't be afraid of it. Perhaps you may resign yourself to seeing me a captain one of these days, though. Now good-bye, and good luck to you while I'm away."

"An' the same to you, an' mickle o't. I'll hear o' ye whiles frae Nancy, or Mrs Leslie, — she's aye ready to speak o' ye. She'll be missin' ye."

"Good-bye, Jamie," repeated Ronald, not noticing the last remark; and as he went away down the street, the old shoemaker looked after him and nodded his head with a sagacious smile.

"He'll no' speak o' her, and she aye listens when I crack up his freendly ways. '*When ye see the laverock fa', ye ken the nest's no far awa'.*' It's a gude sayin' yon, and I hae mickle faith in't; but losh keep

me ! the laverock's been an awfu' time in the lift, and disna seem wearied yet. Aweel, aweel, maybe I'm an auld fule, but if yon laddie disna whustle her doun come anither year or twa, I'll be sair disappointed."

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.











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